Edited by Angela Biscaldi, Vincenzo Matera

Social media and politics of identity

Antropologia della contemporaneità

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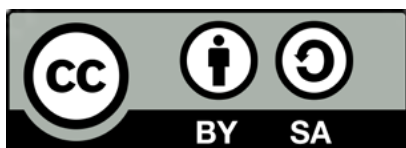
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Social media and politics of identity[*]

Angela Biscaldi and Vincenzo Matera

Digital platforms and identity processes

According to *Digital Global Overview Report* (2022) active users on social media are about 4.7 billion. Over 58% of the world's population uses at least a social platform, meaning a digital space characterized in that virtual social networks can be built, in which users can share text-based contents, images, videos and audios and can interact with each other (Biscaldi, Matera 2019).

These spaces have become more and more important in recent years, as far as day-to-day communicative practices are concerned, and they are one of the most interesting aspects, from a social and cultural perspective, of the increased digitalization process taking place on the global stage.

We are going to talk about that in this book, not so much in relation to the construction of an individual identity or to subjectivity, aspects we examined elsewhere (Biscaldi, Matera 2019, 2022), but in relation to the heterogeneous and complex ways in which social media act on the construction processes of identity, or better of the collective identitary representations in the contemporary world.

This text takes into account the political aspects of identity (Fabietti 1995), thus the role digital platforms play in the setting up of symbolic systems, value frameworks, shared knowledge, new forms of power exercise (Amselle 2001; Appadurai 2012), new feelings of belonging, dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, innovative movements, social transformation.

Based on some ethnographic cases, it addresses the growing aspect of *interreality* that such processes entail (Riva 2010): actually, social media

created a hybrid social space which puts the digital world and our physical world in constant interaction, with a direct impact on the construction processes of reality and of individual and collective identities.

In this digital scene, it is clear that local and global cannot be considered as two conflicting entities, but neither a simply and confusedly hybrid system; rather, the local dimension recreates continuously in a dialectic relationship with the global dimension (Miller 2018).

In order to analyse these dynamics, the anthropological gaze as a critical knowledge of current practices and representations (Herzfeld 2006) will prove to be an essential tool, due to its ability to focus and to construe ways for new forms of negotiation and reproduction of the participants' identities, but also for new forms of resistance and social change, to become apparent and consolidate in social platforms. From this perspective, the contributions here proposed explore the processes, which are not random, but culturally specific, through which social platforms become spaces supporting new identity politics.

The digital era is here!

In other words, this book states that the common expression "the digital era is here" is not just a label to present our world in a technological and modern way, but a forge where a new "culture" is produced, i.e. a new vision of the world and of the subjects – individuals and collectivity – who live and act in it; in this way, they form themselves as subjects having their own identity (and agency). The new digital culture we are building up through the technologies made available by the digital era has its own special characteristics, generated by practices with which we are, or we are becoming – some more than others – more and more familiar. What practices? It is all too evident that for at least twenty years for millions of people everyday world has been tremendously influenced by instruments exploiting digital technologies – computers (and softwares), tablets, smartphones, videogames. We are all connected to the same global system, only in different ways according to the specific features of local contexts we are stuck in somehow. This global system is made up of digital networks which in few years became vital for any activity: for state administration, economy, free time and for all kinds of daily life activities: booking (a trip, a res-

taurant, a seat at the cinema, a medical examination, the vehicle inspection, a sport ground, a taxi, a car and plenty of other things); buying products, services; acquire information; in short, there are lots of things we can do through networks we are connected to. After all, just think about the sense of "bewilderment" we feel if we happen "not to have mobile phone field".

Moreover, it is obvious that the digital era amplifies in an extraordinary strong way our ability to establish relationships with others – as it has always happened in mankind's history, whenever a new technology affects the basic process of our existence, i.e. "communication" (just think of Writing, the Printing Press later on, analogue mass media in the end). If we define communication as a multisensory and multimodal way of human interconnection (Finnegan 2002), we can easily provide insights into the digital era as an amplification of human ability to communicate with others, but also to present themselves concurrently.

The effect of digital in relation to self-representation is very clear if we consider the scope of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, … whose unquestionable power to influence – not by chance it is talk of "influencer" as a new, coveted and high-profit profession – lies in their capacity as identity creators. When you open the Facebook page of your own organization (no matter if it is a business, an association, a political movement or else) you provide an identitarian meaning to something that would otherwise remain frail (or perceived as such).

Does the identitarian value of digital platforms transform the social and cultural worlds we all live in? Or do we transform social media bending them to our concerns? (Miller 2018). This doubt is solved in the second phase concerning technology 2.0, a kind of technology which is ever closer to users, platforms where we can "act" more: social media which are complementary and "interface" with an enormous assortment of "objects" (mobile technology and file sharing systems). Smartphones and tablets on the one hand, platforms (musical platforms for instance) on the other hand, expand "digital culture", make it closer, more familiar, demand that we become increasingly at ease with practices and instruments, so that the boundary between online and offline activities is torn down forever – at least in most people's perception. Nowadays, acting on a social platform is like making a phone call. New needs, new expectations, new forms of subjectivity, new forms of agency gain ground, populate both social and imaginary landscapes.

All this makes far too evident that the term "digital" itself experienced an extension of its semantic scope. At the beginning it was an adjective characterising anything derived from a "binary logic": bit consisting in 0 and 1 (discrete quantities). Indeed, the matrix of the digital world is to be found in the binary logic; computer processors operate according to a digital principle, i. e. the attribution of discrete values to a quantity. Digitizing means to transform a continuous value into a discrete value, characterised by quantities/values which proceed according to a strict binary logic. The digital quality of an "object" (photo, film, music, text, etc.) allows its automatic processing through a computer processor, bringing advantages in time, costs, storage, taken up space. We are in a technological field, merely instrumental. On the contrary, "digital" expresses nowadays a new vision of the world, which involves in an intimate, dramatic and pervasive way the social and cultural fabric, with which we all "wrap", organise (and express) our life.

There are actually two possible approaches to digital culture from an anthropological perspective. You can study it from the theoretical point of view of its ideological implications and its meanings; we can understand the Great Narrative of the comprehensive network immersing ourselves in it: the digital switchover would more or less automatically improved life for million of people in a wide range of areas (education, economy, medicine, democracy, …). Is it like that? Did it happen? Such narrative fuels the trend, which is now common sense, towards recognising that technology got the autonomous power to initiate changes. It is connected to the beliefs and the intentions to modernise "backward" groups. As a result, digital power seems to be nothing but the umpteenth current of globalisation and of the theory of modernisation, taking on the usual unilinear progress track, from pre-industrial pre-modern, pre-alphabetical and (perhaps) pre-civilized world to a better world, in line with the standards and the values of western industrial democracies. Pre-modern world is supposed to better adapt to the digital era. Representing oneself on a network becomes compulsory, or you will be left behind. The framework is the breakdown of an obsolete structure and the rise of a new digital order. Or, you can study digital culture – this is the second point of view – avoiding great narratives: we can favour a different approach, i.e. the ethnographic one, and immerse into practices, daily lifestyle choices, in order to analyse and understand the pervasive way in which the digital dimension is woven

in our lives, modifies them and it is modified in turn (Hine 2015; Horst, Miller 2012). This second way is what this book mainly suggests. Going down this path, we come to a reflection: digital technologies "intensify" a yet powerful dialectic game between global forces pushing towards cultural homogeneity and proliferation of "specificities" (Appadurai 2012). The transnational economic policy expressed by digital power represents the framework in which this match is played, but the fusion of this power with the values of local and specific daily life integrates the digital world into a specific matrix. The paradox, the short circuit, is that universality of digital culture, that irreducible binary logic described above, produces again and again specificities. Even if, according to common sense, "universal" and "specific" are at opposite poles, in the context of the digital era they interact: the more the binary system becomes globally pervasive, the more its practical manifestations fragment into countless identitary representations. The Great digital narrative which brings the world closer together seems to forget specificities, the ones James Clifford defines as "new orders of difference" (Clifford 1993:15) that are emerging: specific cultural values, attitudes, practices, premises. Cultural differences do count, perhaps more than the homogenizing boost (Miller 2018). Perhaps, the digital dimension itself tends to "saturate" (and this time the excesses would be the "digital culture", see Aime 2004). It produces "uncertainty" and also some longing for the pre-digital world (a retrotopia, see Bauman 2018), but this item is not in the agenda. In other words, there will be no going back.

In this volume

Several chapters of this volume provide interpretations of the multiplicity of aspects involved in the changes caused by social media, ranging from consumption practices, capitalization processes, innovation movements and social transformation to identity representations and the construction of new ethnonationalisms 2.0.

In chapter *Anthropology of "traditional food" in Milanese Botteghe Storiche (Historical Shops). Restaurateurs and social media during Expo2015*, Luca Rimoldi considers the way in which culinary traditions – i.e. the concept of what traditional, genuine, authentic, tasty, desirable, viable is – are reinterpreted by the restaurateurs he interviewed in Milan, in relation to an

online space, which is more and more overlaid and interacting with the physical and relational space of the restaurant. Online dimension has got a great importance, not only in shaping restaurateurs', customers' and tourists' imagery (establishing real "regimes of taste"), but also in steering food production and consumption practices (and their social representations) as well as the economic and cultural policies of local administrators.

In that chapter Rimoldi analyses also the ambivalent restaurateurs' conduct towards social media: they are considered the scenery of interaction with customers, yet fundamental, but at the same time perceived as "endangered", i.e. potentially hazardous sites.

In Letizia Bindi's chapter *Digital countryside. New ruralities, smart agriculture and innovation processes* the anthropologist discusses the way digital technologies interact with the practices, the imagery, but also with the rhetoric, the capitalization and value adding processes of the farming and sheep herding world.

Building on the presentation of a series of case studies on the Apulia and Molise territory and also of field practice experience in some parts of Latin America, Bindi presents a critical reflection on the political and economic conditions which enable the digital system to start a series of social transformation processes: supporting a kind of agriculture able to weave virtuous networks between farmers, territories and institutions; nursing a new sense of responsibility towards the environment; contributing to the diffusion of a new concept of responsible consumption and of sustainability; reducing inequalities allowing new forms of business to arise.

In the chapter *Beninese Vodun in the network: between social media and marketability,* Pietro Repishti focuses on social uses of the new communication technologies in vodun practice in Benin.

On the basis of the analysis of some contents delivered via *social media* by some local *féticheurs* in order to expand their relational network, sell products or establish their own personal profile, the author connects those individual communication practices to the widest historical and political trends which have involved *vodun* religion in Benin for the last decades. This contextualization allows him to understand the way social media have fostered the switch of several aspects of *vodun* from a "cultic" to a "cultural" level: it comes to the emergence of government identity policies which are coherent with the patrimonialization processes of such cult and with its use by the tourism industry.

The article by Erika Grasso, Margherita Valentini, Luigi Mangiapane, *Locked rooms and "digital contact zone". Pandemic, interruption of everyday reality and construction of a new museum identity: the experience of the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia in Turin (MAET)*, presents the case-study of the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia of the Turin University (MAET) which takes part, like other ethnographic museums, in what seems to represent a genuine digital turn. If the pandemic emergency of Covid-19 revealed the critical state of the old museum paradigms, social media revealed themselves as places which give rise to content co-creation processess, since they accelerated existing processes aimed to rethink the relationship between museum and community and involved unprecedented plural subjects through the cultural heritage.

That's what the authors wrote:

> Actually, perception changed during pandemic (Colombo 2020) and the "old" dichotomy was overcome: it seems anachronistic to think that the on line presence of a museum should be avoided or that it represents a "necessary evil" of our times. It is now established opinion that digital technology has got the power to assimilate and improve the experience of the subjects who have access to, live through and take part in the heritage communication. Moreover, presence on line together with digital-oriented initiatives seem to be part and parcel both of the *public engagement* museum strategies and of the routes undertaken to be more open, inclusive and "significant" (Simone 2016).

In the chapter *"I'm Mosuo": an example of collective Self narrative on the digital platform WeChat*, Stefania Renda relates the ethnographic data collected during the field research she carried out between 2014 and 2019 in some villages on Lake Lugu and in Yongning district in China, with the ones registered in the public account "I'm Mosuo" on the digital platform WeChat, which discloses contents concerning the Mosuo ethnic group. Renda shows that the concepts of authenticity, cultural identity and intangible cultural heritage are given a new meaning by the different users of the social platform, in order to generate a narrative construction of the Mosuo Collective Self which enhances some traditional elements identified as particularly significant (and capable of being represented in the public sphere) while intentionally excluding others.

The book ends with Marco Traversari's article, *The coming back of eth-nonationalism in the era of social media. Notes on the topicality of the concept "imagined communities",* which investigates the new meanings of the concepts of ethnic group and ethnicity made possible and fostered through the use of social media.

Based on the considerations set out in the famous text by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities*, Traversari maintains that nowadays ethnographic work or work dedicated to studying the identity construction processes of an ethnic group cannot leave aside the technological and social dimension of the digitalisation processes, since the present day imagined communities are more and more the expression of the web, less and less of the press or of the general television system. The analysis of some ethnographic cases proposed by Traversari shows that social media are able to alter agency and the forms of political mobilization of ethnonational organisations to such an extent that the author affirms we have entered the phase of ethnonationalism 2.0.

The articles included in this book show, through the analysis of specific contexts, that social networks play a key role in nowadays complex society: for better or for worse, they expand individual agency, as they allow you to share ideas and to increase social relations capable of constructing new forms of identity and belonging; they affect collective imagination, as they stimulate it with an ongoing flux of images, narratives, interpretations and reinterpretations; they trigger unknown political mobilisation and social transformation processes; they give new meanings to times and places of daily life. Such processes, driven by the new media, are not to be understood according to opposite ideological positions that consider them dangerous attackers against the most human aspects of interpersonal relations (Miller 2018), nor, on the contrary, commendable manifestations of a necessary and unstoppable progress, and not even studied with the usual techniques and methods; rather, they have to be analysed and discussed concurrently through new and targeted field research strategies. Within this framework, the volume dedicated to the relation between social media and identity politics aims to launch a discussion on the new species of critical reflection opening up for anthropological knowledge, i.e. spaces requiring new methods, new theories, new textual forms of restitution and also new forms of *engagement* in the public arena.

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Anthropology of "traditional food"
in Milanese *Botteghe Storiche* (Historical Shops)
Restaurateurs and social media during Expo2015

Luca Rimoldi

In recent years, social media platforms and their uses have experienced a significant and disproportionate surge, contributing to several rapid and deep changes across a range of fields within contemporary society. These include, but are not limited to, changes in working practices, consumption patterns and mobility. Conversely, recent anthropological and sociological debate about food has focused primarily on symbols, processes and production techniques, analysing consumers' expectations and wants as well as the direct relationships between producers and consumers. However, the rhetorics and practices that are constructed as a mediatic object have not received much attention so far, particularly in relation to social media.

What socially constructs the 'traditionality' of food served in a restaurant from the perspective of restaurateurs, and what does this have to do with the use of social media? To answer these questions, between 2014 and 2015 I conducted ethnographic research at a few restaurants recognised by the City of Milan as Botteghe Storiche. Ambrogio, Marco, Guido, Fabio and Valerio, Enea, Chiara and Umberto are the owners of some family-run Botteghe Storiche located in the historical centre of the city of Milan (Municipality 1); through their words and starting from the assumption that in recent years social media have profoundly changed social relations at different levels (Allmer 2015; Chambers 2013; Miller et al. 2018), the essay clarifies how, among restaurateurs, tradition is rethought in an online space, often overlapping and confused with the physical one of the restaurant. Conducting qualitative interviews with restaurateurs in their respective workplaces proved to be a more suitable methodology than participant observation, due to the specific research situation and the constraints imposed by the broader project that had financed the research, Bicocca for EXPO. I often found myself dis-

cussing with restaurateurs while sitting at a table immediately before or after lunchtime and dinnertime. However, the absence of a meeting with restaurant customers prompted me to follow the online activities of restaurateurs and to consider the content of their communicative exchanges, both in their interactions with customers and in the way they present and promote their activities (Rimoldi, 2017). Indeed, all the restaurateurs included in the study were managing a Facebook page with the name of their restaurant. While the frequency of publication of posts was regular, the topics dealt with were more varied. These included information on opening hours, invitations to lunch or dinner on festive occasions, images of dishes associated with the arrival of certain seasonal raw materials, and images of celebrities portrayed together with the restaurant managers or staff. The Facebook pages, in addition to those of other social media and web platforms such as TripAdvisor, have become an integral part of the social life of restaurants. They serve as a forum for customers to express their opinions and evaluations of individual experiences, contesting or appreciating, among other things, the levels of 'traditionality' of a particular dish, comparing it in taste, presentation or quantity to the single ideal of a traditional dish. The analysis presented in this work is a critical discussion of themes that emerged from two sources: direct conversations with restaurateurs, from which excerpts are provided, and indirect observations of the Facebook pages of the restaurants in question, which are referenced but not directly quoted. While discourses around food are not necessarily processes related to its consumption and production, they contribute significantly to the formation of expectations and imaginaries.

The objective of these pages is to demonstrate the significance of the relationships between restaurateurs and patrons, as perceived by restaurateurs themselves. These relationships are considered to be a particularly relevant dimension, which can influence the commercial success or failure of a restaurant. The presentation of results from document analysis, online content and semi-structured interviews is intended to provide insight into this phenomenon. A further specific aim of this contribution is to analyse certain codes and models (Douglas 1972) of rhetoric relating to the ideas of 'tradition' of Milanese restaurateurs, while at the same time highlighting the social construction of a 'regime of taste' and its renegotiation on social media. With this last expression, which refers to Foucault, I wish to indicate a system of discourses that governs its own regularities, prescriptions, reasons and self-evidence.

In this case, however, I am referring to a system of culturally constructed and socially informed normative discourses that orient a constellation of practices of selling and consuming food based on taste and with the idea of tradition at its centre.

In summarising, it can be observed that social media has facilitated the formation of novel traditions. In the case of the Milanese restaurateurs encountered during Expo Milano 2015, these traditions evoke different times and shared spaces transformed by modernity. Moreover, social media is employed to represent and create what my interlocutors identified as the core of their respective activities: the intricacies of relationships with their customers. It is evident that interactions on social media are part of a broader framework of textual productions within which patrons engage in the evaluation of a restaurant (e.g. reviews in newspapers and magazines, wine and food guides, tourist guides). Nevertheless, the ambivalence and malleability of social media are constant features of the everyday narratives of the restaurateurs with whom I conducted the research. In the interactions that take place on Facebook and TripAdvisor (Rousseau 2012), as well as in the discourses of the restaurateurs, one can discern a rhetoric of distancing and rapprochement with respect to a model of dining and communicating with customers. The analysis and reading of these rhetorics form part of the reflection presented here.

The Historical Shops and World Exposition Milan 2015

The term "Botteghe Storiche" (Historical Shops) is used to refer to enterprises or companies that have been listed in a specific register of the Municipality of Milan since 2005. The guidelines for the establishment of this register were defined with the approval of Resolution No. 2220 of 5/10/2004. This document regulates the requirements for access to the register. The municipal resolution underscores the significance of an enterprise's ability to sustain itself for a minimum of five decades within the municipality's territorial boundaries and within the same product sector. Furthermore, the guidelines describe another requirement, namely the possible presence of constructive, decorative, and functional features of historical, architectural, and urban interest, as well as the overall preservation of the original furnishings.

Even the very ambience of the Bottega Storica should suggest a sense of timelessness to the visitor, recalling a certain idea of the past and arousing a feeling of nostalgia. The choice of the term 'bottega' is particularly evocative in this sense. The Italian term is derived from the Latin 'apotheca', which in turn has its origin in the Greek word 'ἀποϑήκη' (apothḗkē), composed of the preposition 'ἀπο', meaning a separation, and 'ϑήκη', meaning storage or warehouse. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the term 'bottega' was used to describe the workshop of artists, writers and painters, as well as the collective of individuals who worked in that space, including assistants and students. The word 'bottega' in the Italian language refers to a room, generally facing the street, where goods are displayed and sold and today, by extension, indicates commercial activities of various kinds linked, more or less explicitly, to craft activities. At a first level of analysis, justified by the choice of noun (bottega) and adjective (historical), these commercial activities could be thought of within a broad category of historical-cultural assets Between 2006 and 2010, five volumes entitled 'Botteghe Storiche Milanesi' were published, financed by the Municipality of Milan and the city's Chamber of Commerce. These volumes collect descriptions and images of the registered historical shops. In the opening volume of the series, published in 2006, Carlo Sangalli, then president of the Milan Chamber of Commerce, states:

> [Historical Shops are] a 'bridge' between economy and sociality, ancient and modern, identity and innovation (...). It is fundamental (...) to preserve these premises, as they not only preserve the identity of the past, but also guarantee the right balance of a modern city, which has become fast, fragmented, globalised and multi-ethnic, and which risks losing itself if it forgets its own history, the sense of belonging around a way of being, of a 'civic' dimension (Sangalli 2006).

The creation of the register and the political discourses that revolve around it socially construct a tradition in a given territory. This tradition extends beyond the boundaries of the territory itself and can be considered an element of what I call the 'memory-based economy' (Rimoldi 2016).

Those activities that are recognised receive a plaque and a parchment attesting to their membership in the Municipality of Milan's Register of Historical Shops. As stated in the same municipal resolution, these items confirm the cultural asset status of a certain business. The plaque and parch-

ment are delivered during a ceremony held every two years in a room of the Milan City Hall. These two elements materially represent the activity's belonging to the social and economic fabric of the city of Milan, thereby becoming a symbol and guarantee of the qualities that these policies seek to convey and preserve.

At the time of the field research, the Botteghe Storiche recognised by the Municipality of Milan numbered approximately four hundred, subdivided by product sectors. From a quantitative perspective, the product type encompassing activities related to the preparation and service of food (restaurants, osterias, trattorias, and pizzerias) has been, and continues to be, the most represented, with approximately forty recognitions. Furthermore, while the objective of the Register of Historical Shops is to safeguard the premises of the business, this stipulation of the municipality fails to acknowledge the alterations and regulations – in the case of restaurants, for instance, health and hygiene protocols, technological advancements in the field of professional appliances and the consequent redistribution of space in the kitchens – that have transformed daily working practices in recent decades. From the perspective of the local institution responsible for the Register, the recognition engenders and activates economic imaginations and strategies that, in the case of restaurateurs, contribute to the emergence of a series of rhetorics about the preparation and consumption of food in the Botteghe Storiche (Rimoldi 2016). The Register of Historical Shops in Milan, known as the Albo delle Botteghe Storiche, has co-instituted a series of discourses that link the activities present on the territory of the City of Milan to the constant presence within it. These discourses highlight the continuity between the past and the present of the economic and social fabric of the urban area.

The discourses of restaurateurs also make constant references to the past of their respective activities, while noting the fractures, differences and discontinuities in their everyday biographical and working life trajectories in restaurants. During the interviews, the restaurateurs frequently articulated a series of ideas concerning food preparation, encompassing the use of specific ingredients and the entirety of the dining experience offered to customers. This discourse alternates between rhetoric of rapprochement and estrangement, reflecting a profound divergence from the past in the creation and maintenance of customer relationships.

The relationships and communicative exchanges between the restaurateurs of the Botteghe Storiche di Milano and their customers extend beyond the time spent by customers in the restaurant spaces.

These relationships and exchanges begin to be built or continue online through social media. It is therefore legitimate to ask how the symbolic images of past economies and societies are interpreted at the table of a contemporary restaurant. How might we try to harmonise what is narrated as tradition with the working practices within a restaurant and within the complex framework of mass culture?

Social media and social relations

The term "social media" is defined as a group of internet applications that are based on the ideological and technological principles of Web 2.0, which enable the creation of user-generated content (UGC) exchanges. As previously stated, since the second half of the 2000s, social media have started to play a significant role in many aspects of social life. Currently, social media are not merely regarded as a means of communication; they have become the very context of certain types of relationships (Allmer 2015; Chambers 2013). Furthermore, they are influenced by and influence specific cultural and social contexts (Costa 2016; Haynes 2016; McDonald 2016; Nicolescu 2016; Wang 2016). It is my contention that the utilisation of social media represents an intrinsic aspect of contemporary life. Indeed, it is my view that social media plays a pivotal role in the formation and shaping of certain fundamental practices within the context of everyday relationships (Miller 2016).

While the numbers and statistics on users, the ways and times of using social media can provide indications of the impressiveness of social phenomena, the anthropological perspective favours the analysis of the contents published, shared and created on the platforms, rather than that of the platforms themselves. In the case of the restaurateurs of the Botteghe Storiche Milanese, the content published on Facebook and the responses to reviews written by TripAdvisor users predominantly pertain to the preparation and consumption of food, as well as the broader concept of quality as it is defined by the restaurateurs themselves. Anthropological literature has related food preparation and consumption practices to dimensions such as soci-

ality, commensality, consubstantiality and conviviality (cf. Grasseni 2007; Counihan, Van Esterik 2013).

In Western societies, eating out is considered a practice that reflects certain peculiarities of the society itself. The decision to consume food in a restaurant alters the context of the act of eating, situating it within a social environment shaped by intricate dynamics. To fully comprehend this phenomenon, it is essential to consider the ambience surrounding the dining experience, as elucidated by sociologist Joanne Finkelstein: "The aura of the restaurant becomes integral to the pleasure of dining out" (1989: 2).

Guido ran together with his father, Marco, a restaurant recognised as Bottega Storica in the centre of Milan. Marco, of Sardinian origin, had made it clear to me that the history of his restaurant and the cuisine served therein were inextricably linked to both his personal history and that of his family. Guido, a graduate in economics and commerce, was in charge of economic management and, like Fabio and Valerio, of customer relations. In February 2015, Guido pointed out to me that the family restaurant's Facebook page was nothing more than 'one more wall, which must be decorated with the same style and care as the other walls... indeed, perhaps even with greater care and attention precisely because it is the one everyone sees and, based on that, they can decide to come and see the others or not'. So, if social media influence and are influenced by social relations (Miller 2016), and if food consumption is also linked to the construction of networks (Coleman 2011), what role does social media play in the construction of the traditionality of a restaurant from the restaurateur's point of views?

Tradition and the restaurateurs of the Historical Workshops

The concept of tradition, as postulated by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), is inherently ambiguous and slippery, both in terms of its denotation and its analytical utility. The immutability, consistency, and preservation attributed to it are rhetorical devices deployed to serve a particular end. As evidenced by the case of the restaurateurs of the Botteghe Storiche, this end is not always linear, consistent with itself, nor is it shared problematically by all my interlocutors. Consequently, I will endeavour to delineate the characteristics of some collective representations, or at the very least, those shared by the group of restaurateurs with whom I conducted the field research. Restaurant

menus usually offer dishes that are considered traditional, but, unlike in the past, they are mainly aimed at a casual clientele; as one of my interlocutors told me about his menu: "I don't change the menus, I change the customers... in the sense that I don't have regular customers every day. For me, the regular customers are those who come back once or twice a year, when I'm in Milan for work or on holiday: they come back here and they want to find the same dishes, those of traditional Milanese cuisine' (Ambrogio).

Certain theoretical lines developed in the socio-anthropological debate concerning the uses of tradition are fundamental to delimiting the specificity of the ethnographic field of my research, circumscribing its objects and focusing on its social repercussions in the rhetoric of the restaurateurs. Tradition has been defined in opposition to modernity and, consequently, as an ideal-typical construct and an analytical concept whose simultaneously active and passive function is to reinforce the homogeneity of societies, to promote social equilibrium - or disequilibrium. In the common sense, however, tradition seems to retain the characteristics of something an- tic that persists in the present, which implies "the absence of change in a context of change" (Lenclud 2001, p. 125) and, especially in the Facebook pages, it takes the form of a communicative tactic capable of giving legitimacy to knowledge and practices. Traditions are generalised through the mass media. Generally speaking, this idea of tradition becomes evident when attention is paid to food and the way certain dishes are prepared, and this certainly has a considerable influence on communication. The ideas about tradition that emerge from the interviews with restaurateurs and their use of the term on social media refer to very different imaginations. Some argue, emphasising the importance of the choice of raw materials, that a large part of their daily activities consists of searching for specific suppliers for certain products; others point out that, although times and technologies have changed rapidly during the life of their business, the recipes used to prepare certain dishes have been handed down from father to son and are still followed as faithfully as possible; all agree on the importance of forms of communication via social media platforms, which can significantly promote a restaurant's reputation - both in a positive and negative sense.

Assuming the fact that tradition is always considered authentic by those who make themselves its bearers (Bortolotto 2011), in the case of restaurateurs, it is evoked as an inclusive and exclusive element among the ones perceived as authentic and those that are not and, as mentioned, is declined

on three levels: type of dish (raw materials), practice (preparation method) and content of the communication itself (but not, of course, the medium). As Enea said:

> Here we eat typical dishes, such as ossobuco, cassoeûla, braised beef, kidney and rice in cagnone, which are the dishes that are made here... then risottos... traditional dishes [...]. Even if, in my opinion, today this type of risotto is no longer functional: today you eat so much with your eyes and... you read certain menus that tell you who knows what... [Enea].

> Regarding eating... We clearly carry on a tradition. Our cuisine is a traditional Italian cuisine... Then Milanese, because we live in the city of Milan, so we pass on specialities such as ossobuco with Milanese risotto, cassoeûla with polenta, Milanese escalope... which, let's say, are part of the city's identity and therefore passed on. Then everyone has their own form of presentation... The second aspect concerns our [his and his family's] place of birth, Sardinia. We combine Milanese specialities with those of our region. This is the tradition... And we've carried it on for a long time: as well as making the city of Milan known, we also make known a piece of our land and our origins [Guido].

Guido's words also seem to refer the idea of traditional cuisine to spheres that transcend the boundaries of the city and find a foothold in the factual history of the managers themselves, conveying an idea of tradition that is immobile in the past, but dynamic in the present (Lenclud 1987). The gastronomic tradition of Milanese restaurants does not only refer to 'typical Milanese' cuisine. In fact, the history of the city reveals how the trattoria model has penetrated the economic and social fabric of the city by regional mobility.

> My father took over the business shortly after he moved, in February 1957. My parents are of Tuscan origin: my mother came to Milan because she married my father and he was already working here in Milan, he was a waiter. He worked in various places, first with an uncle who had a bar in the centre of Milan and then in two or three other places. Eventually, he and a friend took over a restaurant in Piazza XXX. As he had to get married, he decided to take up the business on his own: he counts that this was an area where Tuscans were starting this type of business. [...]. In those years there was no work in Tuscany while here a new business trend was opening, in line with the needs of the city…

Milano was already a big city, but it lacked hospitality. [...] The regional cuisine of the time, the Milanese cuisine, was a rather peasant cuisine, based on butter. At that time there were many osterias: osterias... were places where... first of all, tables were not laid, and they were not places where a family could go because they drank etc. [...] Then there were the trani, but there was either no kitchen or, if there was, it was run by Tuscans. While the bars have always been run by the Apulians - the trani were called that because the wine came from Trani - the trattorias were started by the Tuscans [...]. Instead, trattorias started with the Tuscans, and almost all trattorias are Tuscan, even now. Tuscany has always had a very convivial tradition and there was a simple cuisine, which everyone could enjoy, not fat... compared to other regional cuisines, Tuscan cuisine has always been more approachable [Marco].

The idea of tradition differentiates two well-defined domains regarding the preparation of 'old-fashioned dishes': those that are authentically traditional and those that are not. From the speeches of some restaurateurs emerges a romantic and essentialist image of a certain dish - interpreted as a continuous and well-defined entity throughout the history of the city of Milan - in many cases guaranteed by the De.Co. (Denominazione Comunale) label. Often the restaurateurs, imagining a potential customer, delineate the culinary experience provided by their respective restaurants with the traits of nostalgia and attachment to foods that remind them of childhood. The dish considered 'traditional' refers to an idea of dynamic effervescence, which is recognised by the specific production practices and techniques of the raw material and preparation that manage to offer the eater a kind of escape from the 'fake' and 'standardised' flavours that, in the words of the restaurateurs, characterise contemporary food. On the other hand, the dish considered 'not good' and inauthentic together with its mode of preparation is thought of as a way to satisfy the primary food need or the appetite for tourism; however, the communication tries to make it appear authentic.

Telling me the history of her family's restaurant, Chiara proudly showed me an old notebook in which, she told me, her grandmother had written down all the recipes for the dishes she served in the restaurant: 'my father gave me this, we have always used it to try to keep certain flavours in the dishes... of course times have changed and the ways of preparing certain things have changed, but for me this book makes you realise that here we care about doing things the old-fashioned way'». The issue, however, is not

only symbolic, but also refers to competitive relationships between food consumption places in the urban fabric of the city.

> This restaurant itself belongs to Milan tradition. [...] With our cuisine and our dishes we are trying to perpetuate traditional recipes: risotto con ossobuco, foiolo alla milanese, cassoeûla, polenta con brasato those dishes that people from Milan, "i milanesi" remember having eaten at their parents' and grandparents' place … dishes that reminds of the culinary tradition of a family. This is the reason why we still have, for instance, shared tables… despite some people ask for a reserved table… that is not our idea of a restaurant. [...] Our idea is to get across a message of conviviality at the table, of a very… very friendly service. We seek to provide familiarity together with tradition; this is supposed to be a "Milanese" tavern. As a consequence, the typical dishes of Milan are available [...]. We are a somewhat unusual restaurant: we do not sell beer... [Umberto].

Sharing and conviviality within a restaurant and, therefore, the restaurant model itself, also seem to be part of the discourse on tradition and this makes it implicit how, by contrast, modernity is also perceived as fragmented and individualised. Re-presenting tradition through food, therefore, also means staging customer-retailer and customer-customer relations and highlights how the role of 'tradition remakers' (Giancristofaro 2018, p. 9) is not limited, in the case of restaurateurs, to matters of taste related to food. Indeed, it also directs aesthetic and furnishing choices and articulates the uses of the spaces themselves. The restaurant, in its materiality, seems to configure itself at the crossroads between the public and private dimensions, thus becoming a 'third place' (Erickson 2009): a working space for restaurateurs that is conceived and organised as a domestic environment suitable for serving certain dishes. Within the Botteghe Storiche in Milan, the code of the 'old-fashioned' food and that of the traditional restaurant (Shelton 1990) seem to converge.

The Restaurateurs of the Botteghe Storiche and Social Media

As mentioned, the restaurants registered in the Historical Workshops Register are very different from each other: what they have in common, at a first level of analysis, is their presence in the economic and social fabric of

the city of Milan for a period of at least fifty years and, of course, the fact that all of them are configured as places devoted to the consumption of food. The relationship between the restaurateurs of the Botteghe Storiche and social media appears ambiguous at different levels of analysis.

Facebook pages or identities, almost all of which have been active since 2010, are used as a way of presenting the restaurant, just as if they were, in Guido's words, another wall of the restaurant. In many cases, photographs or images are posted that refer to the restaurant's Bottega Storica status: the image of the plaque awarded to the business by the Municipality of Milan, when not used as a cover image, finds space in posts on the wall, and re-posted periodically. Photographs of the restaurant spaces are also often linked to the seasonal cycle: in the winter months, images of the interior spaces or tables set up are posted; in the summer, on the other hand, the exterior spaces appear, in some cases, embedded in wider views of the urban landscape. Photographs of the dishes on offer also follow the seasonality of the raw materials and are often accompanied by the name of the dish itself and its regional origin. Although social media activities are an integral part of the day-to-day working life in many restaurants, their use by customers going for lunch or dinner is highly stigmatised by the restaurateurs themselves. The use of smartphones is perceived as one of the causes of the change in the meaning of eating lunch or dinner out. The conduct of eating is a part of the totality of forms of social conduct (Elias 1969) and, through narratives of direct experiences, restaurateurs narrate the change in the type of sociability within the spaces of their businesses. Fabio, while he was preparing the tables in his restaurant in February 2015, told me:

> People, especially during lunch, don't talk to each other anymore... they mind their own business; they don't even look at what's on their plate while they're eating, except when they take a photo with their mobile phone. Of course, we are here to serve food... but my family's restaurant has always been a meeting place for customers, especially those who lived in the area: people used to be friendly, they talked to each other... even from table to table. I don't know, maybe now you become friends in other ways. (...) I'm happy to have so many customers... but I wonder: why do you take the trouble to book a table, come here, sit down, order, eat... if, at the end, you don't want to be here?

Fabio's words are echoed by the voices of all the restaurateurs I interviewed, who are convinced that their customers, especially the younger ones, instead

of experiencing the taste of the food served to them and enjoying the atmosphere of the place where they are, prefer to communicate in real time on their smartphones about their positions in the city, their choices of dishes or take selfies instead of paying attention to what they have on their plate or their relationship with the wait staff. As Guido told me:

> Once there were two American girls sitting exactly over there [he points to a table]. I don't remember what they had ordered… maybe fish… after they had started eating. I went and asked them if everything was fine, if they liked the food they had ordered. They answered inn a hasty manner that everything was ok. Some weeks later… can you imagine? … I read their review of the restaurant and they nearly said that the food was rubbish… and so what?! Just tell it to me! You choose a dish which maybe you have never tasted before, and you don't like it… no problem. Just tell me, we send it back to the kitchen and you order something different… these girls were American, but do not believe that Italians are much better in this respect… then… a bad day in the kitchen or in the restaurant room or in both may happen… but in general you try to compensate: if there is something wrong in the kitchen, we try to set it right in the restaurant room and the other way round… if I see that things are going really badly, I go in person and talk to the customers, for instance I tell them the story of the restaurant, … just to save the short time we need to set things straight again and settle back into the rhythm. In some it is enough to communicate!

The absence of direct communication becomes a way in which restaurateurs read online interactions; this widespread perspective is especially materialised in opinions about social media such as TripAdvisor. The latter is generally used to have more direct exchanges with customers than those on Facebook pages: subjects of reviews and consequent responses are the quality of the food and services offered. Although user reviews are recognised as fundamental to a restaurant's reputation, they are considered illegitimate both because of the lack of specific skills and knowledge on the part of the reviewers - in the words of Fabio: 'anyone can write a review' - both because of the conformation of the platform itself - 'many protect themselves with anonymity, there is not always the name and surname of the writer on those sites'.

As restaurateurs have pointed out to me, they often reply to a positive review with a thank-you and an invitation to return, while they motivate or criticise the experience told by customers in negative terms. Responses to positive reviews are always in the same style, while responses to negative

reviews are more detailed and try to justify, often with irony, the reasons for a customer's dissatisfaction.

Valerio, for example, responded to a customer complaining about the size of a cotoletta (schnitzel): 'the schnitzel was not the classic orecchia di elefante (elephant ear), but a simple medium-sized breaded slice', he wrote:

> Dear Sir,
> Thank you for your feedback and I am sorry if you were not happy. I hope there may be another opportunity. I don't want to contradict you, but cotoletta (schnitzel) is one thing and orecchia di elefante (elephant ear) is another. Generally, those who make elephant's ear specify this and of course they also charge... double! We make traditional cotoletta alla milanese (Milanese schnitzel) the way my grandmother used to make it 80 years ago, and we will continue to do so because of our family tradition.

Valerio therefore legitimises the decision to propose a particular dish by referring to authenticity, supported by the reference to regional tradition and the family memory that his grandmother and his grandmother's grandmother used to prepare the same dishes in the same way: 'Just think that when I was a child, my grandmother, who was the first cook in the trattoria, used to make my schnitzel so low and she used to tell me that it was her grandmother who had taught her how to make it this way. I think, as our family tradition, we go back more than 120 years'».

In addition to the reference to what is perceived as 'tradition', the use of ironic dissimulation is often present in the responses to negative reviews or those giving a low score; for example, Guido, responding to a positive review, but giving only two out of five points to his business, writes: "You say everything was good and you would like to come back... but you only rated us two points! If you were to come back, I hope I wouldn't recognise you'; or, again, responding to a review in which the customer claims to have realised too late that the reasons for the absence of the 'queue' due to the excessively high prices,

Guido writes: 'At Mc Donald's there was a very long queue!!!!'.

Moreover, in the perception of the restaurateurs of the Historical Shops, practices that transcend the direct relationship with their customers also become part of the 'quality' of a restaurant, such as, for example, the search

for specific products in specific geographical areas, the relationship between family history and the preparation of specific dishes according to specific recipes. The narrative of such practices, usually only accessible to customers who physically visit the restaurants, is disseminated widely through social media, thus contributing to bringing the respective customers closer and distancing them at the same time.

Renovated urban spaces and traditional food

The interpretative model of the Milanese restaurateurs regarding the so-called traditional dishes seems to meet the social need for a solid, typical, taste-related - as well as place-based - but also, at the same time, untied from it and, therefore, reproducible everywhere. Taste has always been a privileged object of analysis in the socio-anthropological sciences, since it is regarded as a mechanism, an activity (Hennion 2007), founding social hierarchies (Bourdieu 2010) and, consequently, as a set of embedded preferences, cornerstones of cultural capital. Furthermore, if we understand the physical spaces of the restaurateurs as Goffmanian stages or as privileged viewpoints on the transformations of contemporary society (Beriss, Sutton 2007), some of the aspects linking the ideas of tradition to that of taste and, more generally, of food, clearly emerge.

In the discourses of the Milanese restaurateurs, the idea of taste linked to tradition is put into practice, reproduced and has an important influence on their respective working practices. Their words, in my opinion, also highlight the socially shared categories of perception and evaluation of reality that metaphorically sit around a restaurant table and construct a regime of taste.

Regimes of taste are configured as spaces of representation and as places whose formation emerges from empirical categories. From the point of view of place, certainly the changes in the social geography of the city – in particularly from the 1980s onwards - by redesigning urban spaces, they have profoundly changed the role of restaurants in the social and economic micro-dynamics of their neighbourhoods. Enea also emphasises how the change in the function of the neighbourhood had a considerable impact on both the social life of the restaurant - from a meeting place that stayed open even in the afternoon and welcomed the neighbourhood's inhabitants, to a

space for quick and instantaneous consumption. Recounting the history of the restaurant, Enea remembers how his grandmother used to cook for the family at the restaurant even on Sundays 'it was a home and shop life' and, shortly afterwards, 'if someone asked me today to come here and cook even on Sundays, I would think they were crazy! It seems that the restaurant has completely lost its social role and recognisability in the neighbourhood, but that it continues to nurture the nostalgia of the old inhabitants, who have moved out of the centre since the 1980s, and who often get together for dinner on special occasions.

Generally speaking, however, all my interlocutors agreed that the socialisation they have observed and taken part in within the walls of restaurants over the course of their lives - not only at work - seems to have been replaced by online interactions (Rimoldi 2017). The communicative exchanges between the restaurateurs and their respective customers on social media highlight that the taste regime they share does not achieve the goal of having a rigid hierarchical value; rather, it is co-occurringly questioned, renegotiated, justified, showing how such systems are socially nuanced. In this sense, the regime developed by the restaurateurs of the Milanese Botteghe Storiche shows how taste is performed through the preparation - material - and communication - immaterial - of so-called traditional dishes. In this sense, the interactions between restaurateurs and customers on social media reveal attempts to resist this regime, which is sometimes criticised and disavowed, generating reactions in the restaurateurs that range from strenuous verbal protection of their work to an irony that disqualifies the criticism received.

In addition to this, there are questions concerning the everyday life of the restaurant and working life: these also feed into a discourse on tradition since, in the words of the restaurateurs, it is precisely their respective working practices that make this discourse possible and convey it. In this sense, the work of Carole Counihan (2004) has well shown the changes in the Florentine socio-political economy in the transition from fascism to capitalism, focusing on gender roles and the division of labour related to food and its preparation. The anthropologist emphasised how food itself and its collective consumption are fundamental to the creation and maintenance of social ties within families. Counihan also realised that the distinction (Bourdieu 2010) between one's own food and the food of others is a key in the construction of both collective and individual identity for the inhabitants of the Tuscan capital. The discussions with her interlocutors made

it clear how certain dishes have taken on a symbolic value and, precisely because they are no longer cooked and consumed in everyday life - due, for example, to long preparation times - have taken on the role of 'objects of memory' (Sutton 2001, 2016).

> Our job is è offering traditional dishes. If I serve a traditional dish, it must be a traditional dish: risotto is made using broth with a piece of osso buco, a mix of meat, whisked in a certain way… and with saffron powder, not with pistils, and presented with balsamic vinegar. Our dish presentation is very typical, very traditional [...]. In our opinion tradition means a simple and familiar way… [Umberto].

The work practices and discourses of the Milanese restaurateurs seem to find space in this gap and, at the same time, suggest a further step: in the context of the study presented, food also becomes the economic engine of the activities of my interlocutors, a commodity, the sale of which, although cloaked by the third level (that of communication), remains firmly anchored to issues concerning the labour market, its division and its changes.

Traditional cooking is going to die out because there are too many bureaucratic regulations that are too demanding and make no sense. Whereas I used to be able to cultivate, have a vegetable garden and take stuff from there... or have rabbits and eat my rabbit, now I could no longer do so because of traceability. Regulations also create difficulties in terms of hiring staff. I cannot, for example, get my son or daughter to come and give me a hand if I need it [Marco].

Conclusions

In these pages I explained to which extent Historical shops restaurateurs in Milan are involved in the measures put in place by the local authorities in order to protect their activities and how strongly the Municipality tries to maintain them tying them closely to their respective stories and integrating them into wider dynamics of local history and urban economic history. The restaurateurs, however, build their daily work and promote their activities also through social media, understood, when they are used, as places of interaction with their customers and not as static repositories of information.

At the same time, when they are used by customers, they are rejected or evaluated as disruptive elements of the experience itself.

The ethnographic analysis reveals the intersection of a certain idea of tradition with new mass communication technologies. Social media have helped to create new traditions which, in the case of restaurateurs, refer to different times and common spaces transformed by modernity. I see food-related communication as a total social fact capable of creating inter-actions between restaurateurs and customers. Such interactions that do not remain in social but extend to the plane of taste - which goes to define the ideas of traditional food.

Besides the plausibility and reliability of sources, what is important to note is the attempt to give course to a certain type of tradition that bounces back both in the discourses in the presence as well as on the Facebook pages and that feeds a certain regime of taste. The discourses of the restaurateurs bring to light the inverted filial relationship of contemporaneity with re-spect to its traditions, shedding light on a certain degree of de-emphasising of the present with respect to what is perceived as the past and which is actu-alised through the performative aspects of tradition such as the preparation of 'old-fashioned dishes'.».

I considered social media as windows on the social constructions of qual-ity understood, in the perception of my interlocutors, as part of the experi-ence accessible to their customers. In this sense, the social constructions of quality are configured as representations capable of shedding light on the successful or unsuccessful encounters of restaurateurs with their customers about food, which becomes a vehicle for sometimes ambiguous, sometimes asymmetrical communication.

The interactions of the restaurateurs on social media, as well as their dis-courses, simultaneously show a distancing and a rapprochement with the customers who frequent their restaurants. On the one hand, restaurateurs complain about the change in the social role of their restaurants: from a reference point for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood or area, to a desti-nation for tourists and occasional customers, with whom they hardly build a relationship during lunch or dinner; on the other hand, however, inter-actions are present, albeit delegated to a different space than the physical space of the restaurant. Finally, I analysed how restaurateurs construct a regime of taste based on what is perceived as tradition, while also trying to highlight how people - both my interlocutors and the customers who inter-

act with them on social media platforms - convert taste into both practical knowledge and the actions through which it is performed. In this sense, the analysis reveals how the construction of a taste regime has to stop at the crossroads between a structuralist assumption that frames taste as a mere mechanism capable of perpetrating a certain social hierarchy and a post-modern approach, which emphasises the exquisitely subjective characters that characterise each individual in different ways.

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Digital Countryside
New ruralities, smart agricultures and innovation processes

Letizia Bindi

Starting from ethnographic researches of the project Erasmus Plus 'EARTH' (Biocultural heritage and sustainable territorial development), this article attempts to analyse how poetics concerning rural communities and their mediatic narrations through the new ICT and the digital platforms change, both in Italian contexts – Rete Rurale, Rural4Learning, Vazàpp, some firms in Molise – and in processes of rural and regional development – Bolivia, Argentina. At the same time, communication technologies and digitalization of agriculture are also changing politics and governance of the development and regeneration processes of rural, upland and inner areas: transhumant shepherds, female entrepreneurs and women's networks, innovative and visionary cooperatives, companies marketing biological products of the territory on digital platforms aimed at joint responsible purchasing groups through ICT in the inner areas of the Southern Apennines, as well as upland depopulated territories in Latin America. Among the rhetorics of participationism and the practical forms of self-organisation through digital networks, a new way of living and working is catching on in rural areas.

ICT, Agricultural heritage, Sustainability, Participation, Agency

Between 2018 and 2022 an Erasmus + Capacity Building project was carried out focussing on cultural heritage and sustainable development of rural areas. The E.A.R.T.H. project (Education, Agriculture, Resources for Territories and Heritage / Biocultural heritage and sustainable territorial development) was coordinated by the writer on behalf of Università degli Studi del Molise and involved nine universities and three NGOs from six different countries in Europe and Latin America (Italy, France, Spain,

Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia). In the framework of this project several training modules were developed, which focussed on interconnection between multidisciplinary skills – anthropology, geography, rural sociology, agricultural economics, law – and also good practices were collected from various local areas concerned by the selected case studies.

It was an opportunity to summarize research efforts developed in recent years within the Research Centre BIOCULT of Università degli Studi del Molise (Biocultural heritage and territorial development), founded in 2015 at this university, gathering representatives of all departments and focussing our research and *public engagement* action precisely on heritage protection and valorisation, social innovation in agriculture, environmental and social sustainability of the development and transformation processes of rural areas.

In the framework of this work and in line with an interdisciplinary perspective, information was collected and specific research was carried out on a relatively new topic, which is very interesting for the ethnoanthropological analysis: the relation of the various groups of farmers and shepherds we met with the new ICT and the flux of digital data, with online communication and market and with the influence of digital technologies on rural community structures, on their system of values.

Some research, based on the international circuit of work and interuniversity exchanges within EARTH project, takes guidance from case studies in Latin America, observed by the writer during periods of fieldwork – for instance, at some pastoral communities Mapuche in Chubut area and Ingeniero Jacobacci in Patagonia, Argentina. Other is inspired from examples discussed and presented by colleagues from Bolivia who worked on use and diffusion of technologies and digital communication channels in the area of Macharetí in Bolivia. Other, again, derives from fieldwork and interviews with farmers conducted in the context of ethnographies of the changing rural world in the region Molise, carried out in close cooperation with the research activities of BIOCULT Centre: transhumance in the Apennine, in particular in the Molise area, with their patrimonialization and promotion through the increasing use of digital channels; the experience of a company like Vazàpp in the province of Foggia: its success in terms of site visits and online shopping depends on online communication and on the anticipation of the experience through the network; the two companies 'Natura vicina' and 'OltreBIO' in Molise, which have shown their ability in using new digitalisation technologies in agriculture

and e-commerce in different forms, as a key factor to their success and business consolidation in recent years.

These ethnographic researches were carried out in cooperation with colleagues and co-workers from various subject areas, in the spirit of the Research Centre BIOCULT, as a part of specific research programs1 or in agreements signed with various local authorities or associations2 specifically interested in these issues. They took place between 2019 and 2022, through inspections, interviews, text and site analysis, a wide use of digital ethnography, also bearing in mind the long lockdown period that characterized this phase and allowed us to see the increasing use of information and communication technologies and of e-commerce, exactly at this specific historic moment, when also food production chains and their distribution forms, in varying proximity, were deeply reorganised and transformed, due to social distancing and the new production and marketing conditions.

This article, therefore, after a review of the recent multidisciplinary scientific literature (Klerkx, Jakku, Labarthe 2019), sought to discuss three different aspects of the new ICT impact on rural communities and their representations, knowledge and practices: 1) the consequences of these profound transformations in the rare contexts of the so-called 'traditional' rurality and pastoralism and the new relation system between farmers and experts in the field of technological innovation in agriculture, determined by this new operational environment (Aker 2011; Fraser 2019a, b); 2) the use of new digital technologies to improve crop and grazing management (Galliano 2017; Driessen, Heutinck 2015); 3) new ICT and social media as promotion, marketing and distribution channels for those products of the food supply chain which are able to rise up, at least to a certain extent, against the constraint and the duties imposed by the prevailing channels of the Large Scale Retail (GDO) (Glover et al. 2019; Janc et al. 2019).

Considering the above, the question is raised whether it is possible to find in the use of technologies and digital platforms some degree of autonomy and empowerment of the rural communities, although internally divided and mixed, and if this use of ICT may be a form of new rural agency in broader or anyway translocal and transnational frameworks (Bindi 2019). Finally, we sought to reflect on the participatory technology development and its impact on territorial politics, on changes in production, on the representation itself of agri-food products and on the imagery of the farmers' and shepherds' world as different forums for cultural dialogue between research and action.

New ICT and rural practices

In recent years the use of various digitalisation forms in agriculture has indeed developed significantly. The application of big data to agriculture and livestock sector, the use in rural environments of the so-called "internet of things", that of augmented reality, of robotics, of the sensors, of 3D printers, of integrated systems, as well as connectivity and use of AI and blockchains in agriculture are all increasing. In agroindustry the use of digital and information technologies is widely established. Companies and researchers are attracted to them, in order to optimize productivity, sustainability and ease of management. In view of the growing scope of agricultural and computer science, also social sciences in a wider sense – from economics to socio-anthropological science and to studies on governance and territory politics – have recently started to analyse the various effects of the so-called digital agriculture on the agri-food production systems and their "value chains" (Helmsig, Vellema 2011; Lyon 2018; Smith, Berruti 2019; Zhao et alii. 2019; Ezeomah, Duncombe 2019), while renewing to some extent topics and questions of social science studies in a rural environment and the whole representation system of the agro-pastoral world in contemporary societies, in particular facing so many conflicts and contradictions, due to the present climate crisis and the economic imbalances summed up in the wide category of "global South" (Biehl, McKay 2012; Bierschenk 2014; Hart, Sharp 2014).

The interest of socio-anthropological science in those transformations of agricultural practices started at least in the Eighties, when Rhoades and Booth (1982) began to reflect on the "farmer- back-to-farmer" approach (FB2F), according to which it was simply proposed that any action of social investigation and research in agriculture would proceed from a discussion with the farmers and come back to them as restitution and verification of what researchers noticed and learnt:

> we can easily consider such an approach as leading to the successful "participatory paradigm" of research applied in rural areas, which would be largely discussed later on in social science and public anthropology in the field of sustainable development (Ballacchino, Bindi, Broccolini 2020).

The other important interpretative framework, in which the observation of the transformation processes of agriculture in specific contexts can be integrated and transferred, is certainly the work by Bruno Latour on the

constant interaction between knowledge and technology; he started it with the pioneering investigative work on the expertise transfer between French and Ivorian managers in the post-colonial Ivory Coast (Latour, Shabou 1974) and pursued it with further research (Latour 1979, 1991, 1999). The greatest contribution of Latour's considerations to the issue we are trying to address here is the conceptualisation of science and technologies as a socially rooted context, made up of actors and institutions performing cultural practices. In this respect, scientific and technological knowledge becomes another "local knowledge", to be observed and analysed under the same logic and interpretative forms of 'classic' ethnography.

A first aspect of social science considerations focuses on the use and adaptation to ICT in an agricultural context: it urges the practical adoption of new technologies in agro-pastoral production systems which used to be characterised by more traditional and manual processing forms. In the last twenty years, for instance, the use of some digital media spread also to remote areas, traditionally less modernised, and had a major impact on European rural areas: use of GPS for spatial orientation and to control part of land of interest, mobile phone as a form of distance communication and information, use of social media both as a form of sociality in inner, isolated or remote areas and as an organization form for movements and experiences of rural activism.

Another issue concerns the development of the discussion on digitalisation management in agriculture, as well as the social dimension of innovation in agricultural production activities, which, however, at the same time raise interesting issues concerning impact on humans, on the environment, on animals and ecosystems. One of the major questions actually arising at the increasing spread of ICT in the management and rationalisation of agricultural work is whether it is consistent with the urging and the impulse toward a more and more sustainable agri-food production.

> Combining agricultural anthropology with STS [Science and Technology Studies] implies analysing equally both farmers' and scientists' cultural contexts as they come together. Empirically focusing on situated practices, rather than reified conceptual categories of "local" and "scientific", will contribute to the generation of new insights into the factors that enable and constrain effective, participatory technology production (Crane 2020, p. 51).

The question is if anthropology could provide a critical perspective on the relationships between communities of practice, local knowledge hand-

ed down orally and technological and scientific innovations, introduced through the encounter with know-how and specialized knowledge, with new forms of transfer of knowledge and learning: an interaction environment between different living and working forms, in which anthropologists and, more generally, social scientists are increasingly called upon to play a role as "intercultural mediators" between farmers and researchers and to observe interactions as well as transformation and technological transition processes of rural communities as a complex field of ethnographic and interpretative analysis.

While preliminary work goes back to the end of the Nineties and the beginning of the new millennium, most of the discussion and of the scientific contributions, completely multidisciplinary, on these subject matters are growing enormously in recent years. Between 2018 and 2020 several congresses and international conferences were held, which focussed on these topics: International Farming System Association Symposium, European Society for Rural Sociology Congress, International Rural Sociology Association Conference (Crane 2020: 51), but also several panels of the Congresses of American Anthropological Association and of the European Association for Social Anthropology. On each of these occasions debates were held on topics and case studies about transforming communities that are increasingly using media and digital technologies in a widespread and accelerated way both in their daily life and in their production activities.

At the same time, a lot of international research projects have focussed for some years on the socio-cultural, economic and political consequences of ICT on individuals and communities of the various countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia, New Zeeland (Crane 2014: 56).

In terms of policy instruments and of the governance perspectives of the rural development processes in Europe, a lot has been done to analyse the impact of smart farming and of digital agriculture on the reconfiguration of agricultural practices and of the behaviours of rural communities, on their representation systems. In this wide and multi-disciplinary field some discipline prevail, like rural sociology, economic and human geography, agricultural economics and studies about social innovation and marketing, as well as communication studies.

Research on receipt and application of digital innovations in the domain of agricultural activity has been developed, as well as analysis of consequences and transformations resulting from the use of technologies in a rural

context, resistance, failure, setbacks in processes, all of them causing and demanding remarkable adaptation of the parties involved in the innovative production forms and in the new digital technology entwined with the traditional and customary agricultural activity, first of all the human-machine interaction, which has characterised modern rurality for a long time imposing gradual forms of adaptation. This is followed, with a more recent and, if possible, even stronger impact, by far-reaching transformations in products distribution and advertising that make this field of survey very topical and thereby to be observed with great caution.

In Italy, for instance, as far as the Ministerial provisions are concerned, in recent years the network Rete Rurale Nazionale was in charge of the agricultural development program (Planning 2014-2020), for a better implementation and management of the "Programmi di Sviluppo Rurale" [Rural development programs] at a national level and together with their regional devolutions, aiming in particular to the "involvement of all stakeholders, transparency and visibility of EU and national politics"3, training of young generations through a vigorous programme of dissemination activities, remote and on-site training and construction of networks by means of the "Rural4learning" or "Rural4University"4 programmes. It is no accident that such programmes are geared to agricultural development, organic farming and innovation, as well as the development of a relation between students, entrepreneurs and innovators in agricultural field through targeted information, training and facilitation actions.

When Paola Lionetti, head of the Communication committee of the agricultural network at the Ministry for Agricultural Policy, described the activities of the specific ministerial programme during one of the International Courses of the "EARTH"5 project, precisely about issues concerning sustainable agricultural development and digital innovation, she pointed with satisfaction to the large amount of contacts got through the website of Rete Rurale over the last years, the value of some campaigns such as *Rural4Learning* or *Rural4University* in providing information and supporting the new generations in their choice of a farming or sheep-herding job, the importance of research and innovation in identifying integrated design forms and good practices, which could favour innovation and improvement of production and a better quality of life for farmers and "new peasants", taking up the famous although not enough questioned wording by Van der Ploeg (2008):

"The collaborative web , the transfer of information and new projects the among farmers, institutions, associations, innovators is developed through the network, through communication and the exchange of good practices, the transfer of information and new projects, the connection to new networks" – Lionetti went on in that presentation – pointing out some specific and more recent tests as virtuous example of a participatory, inclusive and proactive use of online communications and dissemination activities by means of social channels and new media as well as dedicated platforms[6].

So far we are somehow confronted with an institutional narrative in which we recognize some key-words, a certain style and consolidated development lines: technological innovation as a positive element, free from ambiguity, communication and interaction among farmers and between them and the institutions, as well as expert system as a goal. The activity of Rete Rurale in this respect focuses on the pair tradition / innovation and reiterates its confidence in the web, in the first place as an opportunity of interconnection.

Against this background, however, also reading the working plan of *Rural4University 2020*, there is awareness of the need to use the new digital technologies and above all the online dissemination channels as instruments for an easier penetration of the contents and strategies of the new Common Agricultural Policy 2021/27 and of the complex undergrowth of programmes and funds7 becoming available in the new processing cycle and that they obviously wish to guide and direct. Meanwhile, in 2017 the Ministry for Agricultural Policy8 launched a range of measures to promote digitalisation and investments on artificial intelligence in the forthcoming programming of the National Rural Development Plan.

Against a background of initiatives and pressure toward the digital rationalisation of agricultural activities, the goal is essentially to optimise expenditure, reduce the environmental impact (carbon print and pollution caused by excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides), but also and above all to enhance yields and reduce input, to monitor the different consequences on the environment, to have more transparency and traceability in the production processes of the agri-food chain.

Limited farm size, the farmers' high average age, a very old machine fleet among the most numerous in the world, as well as the low diffusion of broadband and ultra wideband, are specific features to keep in mind while developing appropriate policies aimed at spreading Precision Farming.

Training and information are essential for the development of this sector, as well as for the diffusion and application of new technologies at farm level9.

The Ministerial action seems to strongly direct 'traditional' agriculture toward innovative forms and methods and to the take-up of new technologies, in line with the Common Agricultural Policy, which not by chance clearly endorses this kind of transition, coherently with the orientation of Agenda 2030 and of the European politics related to the *green/digital transition* for the next decades[10].

What businesses and what actors of the rural world are meeting this challenge, i.e. this line of development and transformation of farming? How is it intertwined with an increasing longing for roots and for regional product awareness? And with those aspects of storytelling which point out the so-called identitarian, traditional, cultural features filling any communication concerning the agri-food chain? The two things do not seem to be in contradiction: increasing pressure and major founding sources for new technologies go hand in hand with communication and marketing based precisely on *embeddedness* and on the rhetoric of roots, the value of age-old, traditional processing forms, ancient *cultivares* and indigenous animal breeds, authentic nature making a particular agricultural product unique and 'excellent' at the same time.

Looking at advertising campaigns and web sites of a lot of farm holdings, we realize how often this line binding together authenticity / tradition / uniqueness / excellence is increasingly flanked by *smartness*, with process control and digital traceability at all stages of production and processing, highly technologized certification capacity, virtual and 3D visits to farms and crops, i.e. with all those marketing strategies that make loyalty marketing, proximity and a somehow capitalized emotion elicited by an agricultural product the very core of their communication campaigns.

Vazàpp (Dig your garden!)

Rete Rurale placed *Vazàpp*, the first rural hub, originated from the experience of APS "Terra Promessa" in Apulia, chaired by Francesco Savino and situated near Foggia, which in 2020 organised the workshops of *Rural4Learning* and *Rural4University* and the course *Rural Learn by* Rete Rurale, among the most interesting experiences taken into account, not surprisingly, by Rete

Rurale itself in 2020 as an example of good practice in on line/on site communication and of an agriculture able to build virtuous networks among regions, institutions, expert system and above all between farmers.

Also Giuseppe Savino cooperated with the above mentioned project EARTH, outlining the multifunctional activities the cooperative have implemented since 2014 during the Online International Course organised with colleagues and students by six European and Latin American countries participating in the consortium. It brought information, exchange, interconnection activities and discussions among farmers in the same area directly in the neighbourhoods, in the region and at the same time generating an intense network of online contacts. Starting from 2019, we therefore follow systematically the various activities and the awareness, information regeneration campaigns "towards a relational agriculture" carried on by Vazàpp and its leaders.

Starting from a personal reflection pathway on intergenerational and interpersonal relationships in a rural context and from a path of faith, social commitment and quest for a better relation with our neighbours and all people, Savino defines "cultivating ideas and beauty", aggregating, building trust as his goals, "because in ugly places individualism dwells": tulip plantations, old seeds, harvesting together with people who go there specifically to share the experience of harvesting or processing certain kinds of products. The distribution of such products, in some cases frail, impromptu, but at the same time of great communicative impact – like in the case of the tulips -, takes place through a powerful network of digital contacts, an interconnection work constantly mixing experience levels with sustainability levels and the remote relation to which some urban users are more and more used: cultivation and online monitoring vegetable gardens, distance purchasing and adoption of food-producing animals, virtual visits to fields and mountain pastures, exploration and arcades with a high aesthetical and immersive level displaying agri-food products and their landscape.

"In a few hours– told us Giuseppe Savino – the tulips picked in his small ground were sold" and the virtual network, smart and lively, had easily overcome the problems of distribution and, at that precise moment, of social distancing due to COVID-19 which made timely distribution to flower purchaser impossible.

> Once again network cohesion – says Savino again – demonstrated that new technologies and social media allow small "miracles" to take place: we got in touch with the nearest hospitals and, in order not to send everything to landfill,

thanks to a digital solidary network paying for distribution, we delivered the tulips to hospitals up and down the peninsula, as an element of beauty and solace for the difficult time they were experiencing[11].

Then, circularity, proximity, lateral thinking, rapidity, interconnection capacity become the key words of a new way of living describing work in the countryside where, not by chance, Savino points out to be the only farmer in a group of members, slightly more than ten, who mostly are expert in communication, informatics, design, certification processes, etc.

Meanwhile, a further aspect of deep interconnection was noted by Savino and by Rete Rurale when choosing its experience as a virtuous one: *Vazàpp* stood out initially for an activity of interconnection and construction of new networks among the farmers in the neighbourhood, which was more practical than virtual. They indeed organised, starting from their territory, "contadinner": very convivial meeting opportunities for the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside, who had rarely met and discussed before. Such experience was not very digital so far, but the "contadinner" became over time an event, appreciated and supported by politicians at a regional and national level, observed with curiosity also by other international experiences, which wonder what the special source of success of these happenings was. Now the meetings are 'repeated' everywhere, in the presence of trained instructors or guided by the experience of Vazàpp leaders; connections, contacts and promotion for these events, multipliers of new relationships among local stakeholders are essentially organised trough social networks and digital platforms and through communication ad hoc in the new media. In this respect, a seemingly very "rustic" action, like sitting on hay bales and chat while tasting wine or a local craft beer, is just apparently a merely local and territorialized act, because it conceals a dissemination, which is structured and spread essentially using new means and with completely different communication styles, speed and aesthetics from the at times bucolic, antique, folkloristic representation of rurality, which has been dominant for years in our communication and on which the critical eye of our disciplines focussed very early in the research history.

This approach adopted by the association Terra Promessa and by the cooperative Terra Terra, which provided the impetus to all activities and productions of Vazàpp

…facilitates the trust-building among stakeholders with a bottom-up approach and stimulates cooperation and the creation of positive knowledge flows. Moreover, mapping the subjects in the territory and the stakeholders through survey and report activities, which further characterizes social-innovation formats, enables Vazàpp to emerge as a significant subject, a stakeholder toward the communities it is addressing, and a keeper of up-to-date information for the development of policy and entrepreneurial initiatives[12].

Savino emphasizes the value of interchange and construction of cooperative networks by means of the "contadinner" experience, plays with the link between "chilometro zero" and "chilometro vero" ("zero kilometre" and "real distance"), which associates the shortening of the distribution chains through the online circulation of information with the proximity built up by means of cooperative networks between responsible producers and consumers: in addition to the direct knowledge of the product they want to consume, they get acquainted with its producer(s) and they establish a personal relationship of trust with people concerned with our foodstuffs:

And so it happened that Peppe Zullo, a worldwide renowned chef, heard of the small tomatoes grown by Luigi Turco using brackish water next to the shores of Lesina Lake and used them for his special dishes or that other famous chefs use the sheep cheese produced by Luigi Giordano, a young transhumant shepherd from the Carpino[13] area for their cuisine.

This apparently simple idea of interconnection both on site and through networking represents probably one of the most important elements of innovation in agriculture and it is intended to change in several ways both the scene of contemporary agro-pastoral production and the image of contemporary farmers and shepherds.

Big feet, quick mind

Added to these aspects, most closely linked to the use and implementation of digital instruments and environments for communication and interconnection in a rural context, there is the impact of the diffusion in agriculture of digital technologies and communication, in terms of representations of

rurality and of the subjectivity of the farmers, on their abilities and on their daily routine.

As we already mentioned, the topic of *smart rural villages* has been given increasing room in the agenda of the post pandemic recovery plan, putting forward issues like access to connection, but also rationalisation of basic services in these disadvantaged areas in order to counter depopulation, ensure the right to health, education, mobility, fruition of consumer goods and catering[14].

Now, on the one hand we have new digital technologies in agriculture, intended to develop and sustain participation and collaboration processes for the sound operation of the entire economy in a region; on the other hand we have a sort of system of digital formats and services as instruments for a sustainable, rational, durable territorial development, which can allow citizens to stay in mountainous and rural areas. In this sense, the agro-digital governance seems to be geared to sustaining agriculture and food sovereignty, as well as the construction of a circular and sustainable economy of agri-food productions, based rather on access – to land as well as to information – than on possession.

One noteworthy element about the above mentioned aspects is an analysis carried out in the region Molise, which went more in-depth along time through direct observation, interviews, relevant documentation provided by directly affected parties. According to a statistic of 2019 by the Ministry for economic development, the goal for 2020 was that all rural households could be connected to broadband, 69.3% of which with a speed exceeding 100 Mbit/s. Therefore, the problem of the so-called *digital divide* in Southern Apennine areas seems to have been resolved in this small region in central-southern Italy, at least as regards the access to connection. Another issue is that of investments in ICT or in incentives for the use of ICT and of e-infrastructures in advanced projects on the programming of the last PSR cycle and of the structural funds 2014/20. The data concerning the monitoring on PSR conducted in that region signal, for instance, that the ratio between all projects submitted for PSR in the region and those involving high performance oriented actions is 62 to 1190, which is a clear sign of the relative lack of interest of agricultural entrepreneurs and stockbreeders in the use of ICT, as well as of a certain mistrust in the growth opportunities of their activities through the use of ICT. Whereas, in fact, the adoption of technologies and ranges of advanced communication has to be seen as an opportunity for the development of new business models better suited and

closer to young entrepreneurs, who consider this innovative element as a resource rather than limit (Ievoli et alii, 2020).

In this sense, it's interesting to note the role that new digital technologies and networked communication played in the start-up and initial setup of some local holdings as for information and management of organisational processes and the way this use of ICT is conveying new business models and a new concept of rural enterprise, also in very fragile and remote contexts like the inner and southern Apennine regions. Actually, in some agricultural holdings in Molise, owned by people 'under 40', the network strategy plays a central role, together with the opening of new opportunities for the digital marketing of products.

Assuming that the latest trend of the returning agricultural holdings – as they could be defined – is the extension of the networks, the emphasis on a closer link with the territory, in-depths studies, the new ICT will certainly facilitate a higher degree of interconnection between inner rural areas and global market, between farmers and stockbreeders, whereby interactive learning and technological and social innovation in rural areas are based on their not only geographical, but above all cultural and social proximity, on their emotional, amicable relationships, on the passing on of knowledge.

A first example do not go beyond a merely narrative and promotional use of ICT and social networks in the patrimonialization and valorisation process of transhumance in Molise, which has been one of the aspects of the new, somehow auspicious perception of the region as a tourist destination and a major focus of its global image. During the two most important years in the application process of transhumance to the UNESCO intangible heritage list, opportunities and online channels dedicated to that practice proliferated and developed a real digital narrative of the various initiatives that accompanied and followed that process. They are essentially audio-visual documents with comments, evidences, narratives aiming at the construction of transhumance as an 'event' and as a 're-enactment'. Social networks have been playing an important role in promoting and valorisation of this practice at a local level, but above all for its national and supranational visibility; the 'digital presentation' resulted in an exponential growth of the contributions made in different locations and circulated.

At the same time, however, the presence in the new media and social networks enabled also a real networking activity among shepherds and stockbreeders from various regions and even Countries, making really easier the co-construction process of a sense of belonging and of shared commitment to defend and protect the practice of extensive livestock farming.

It is no coincidence that the passage of flocks in big cities as great "events" – Madrid, Grenoble, Bergamo, etc. – as well as the extended transhumances like the interregional one by the Colantuonos across Molise and Apulia or the *Routo* across the valleys of Piedmont and the French plains of la Crau became excellent digital objects, photographed and filmed by photographers and film-makers for documentaries, hosted by the major international magazines.

At the same time, however, the networking activity developed not only in the sense of turning transhumance into a show, it also enabled connection and a very practical collaboration between stockbreeders, shepherds, activists, scholars from everywhere, setting up global interest and commitment groups, like the Pastoralist Knowledge Hub of FAO and more recently the Global Board of the International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralism[15], which worked and obtained from the United Nations the designation of 2026 as the International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralism.

The high online media coverage of transhumance describes a very basic aspect of the use of digital technologies in the agro-pastoral field: ICT and new media as dissemination channels and multiplier of visibility and interest towards a given phenomenon and an agricultural practice strongly patrimonialised, that somehow became part of a system of tourist offer and pleasure for urban users seeking experiences and emotion linked to heritage. On the contrary, it only partially refers to the use of ICT as an element for the construction of national and international cooperation networks, supporting a particular form of livestock farming and the shaping of the agricultural landscape; this points toward the potential of digital technologies also in the building up of a new awareness, which can negotiate its way among farmers and shepherds, as eco-systemic services' operators and as keepers of biodiversity and of sustainable and locally characterized practices, as a value for the region and consequently in the building up, somehow, of a new conscience as a political subject in the controversial debate on climate change and on the urgently needed ecological transition.

In Molise

A completely different local experience was observed in the region Molise: we are talking about "Natura Vicina", an agricultural holding founded in 2016 on the initiative of three young entrepreneurs and located in Macchiagodena[16], a strongly depopulated municipality in Molise upland. All

three protagonists of this business project are graduated - Communications engineering, Economics, Industrial Technology –, and their families of origin come from rural areas in Molise. In the interviews and informal discussions on their approach to life in a rural environment and to farm work they reveal a common understanding and an ideal shift towards environmental protection, the development of ethical products and the establishment of mutual communication and production circuits. "Natura vicina" essentially proposes its customers to remotely monitor their organic crops and to steadily receive information about the different stages of cultivation, so as to develop a particular commitment and link with the territory and the producers of the agro-food products they consume. The business project of "Natura Vicina", therefore, is based on a concept of proximity – usually basic in the market of organic and biodynamic agriculture – implemented through the use of technologies and digital media: customers have actually the possibility of monitoring the growth of vegetables and other products they are going to buy via PC or smartphone; this way, the consumers/buyers can develop a new awareness of the agricultural work necessary for the cultivation and harvesting of agro-food products, together with a cognitive and emotional sharing with the farmers engaged in those activities and, at a more institutional and maybe ideological level, a more judicious commitment in defending and supporting sustainable agriculture and responsible consumption. The target of this business changed deeply over time: at the beginning "Natura Vicina" was mostly visited by consumers from major urban centres in Central and Northern Italy, including some restaurateurs particularly committed to quality and direct insights into the production processes of the raw materials used to prepare their recipes. Certainly it was a high level target, focussed on the value added to the products exactly by the use of ICT to build up new trust relationships between producers and consumers and on the idea, so to speak, of "staging" of the agricultural process, which is surely responsible for some cognitive transformations and some orientations toward contemporaneous farm work and imagery of rurality, and which justified and still justifies also charging higher prices for the products, because of their certified quality and the possibility to trace on an on-going, although remote, basis their production process. It is no coincidence that in 2017 the holding got from the region its only one award as "innovative start-up" precisely for this radically innovative and crucial use of ICT in their activities of promotion and commercial communication

with their retained customers. However, over time, adding yet further a new widespread awareness of the importance of healthy food and of the risks posed by the inadequate and reckless production of agri-food, the number of users and buyers increased: more and more buyers from a larger area started paying attention to valid and verifiable food traceability. The three young and brilliant entrepreneurs, however, did not fail to point out the infrastructural limits linked to the network connection, as well as their initial lack of experience with marketing strategies, which actually required the involvement in the business development of suitable people, who could join communication support and the core idea of making crops visible, i.e. of a convincing somehow "ready-made" narrative and representation of agricultural work during the different stages of the growing and harvesting cycle. This aspect, by the way, makes it clear once again that multidisciplinariety and a right mix of skills cannot be avoided now, given the interweaving of farming with a scientific and technological knowledge, aiming at the sustainable development of a certain area; they need to be supported through specific training measures and targeted policies.

Similarly, in 2017 another enterprise located in Lucito, again in Molise, moved towards the online sale of organic products exclusively from that region. "OltreBIO" – this is the name – has a business profile similar to "Natura Vicina": young people, under thirty, graduated - in this case in Political science and Communication science-, open to internationality. The two entrepreneurs who started this business are indeed Italo-Belgian and they have always been professionally interested in food related topics, in mobility and accessibility of markets, but also engaged in sustainability, in fighting wastage, in promoting responsible food consumption. They decided to come back to Italy and consciously settled in Molise: they actually considered that local products were particularly in keeping with all positive aspects of the basket they intended to make up and disseminate, with a strong focus on recognisability and territorial traceability and on the - in a certain way - political importance to sustain and support small and very small undertakings in a relatively peripheral area of the region, but also, in their view, with an excellent level of agri-food products. In the case of "OltreBIO", ICT are called upon to play one of their main, but also simplest roles: "reconnecting demand and offer of local agricultural products through an e-commerce platform" (Ievoli et alii, 2019: 12).

The first need they had to be confronted with was the lack of experience of local producers with digital platforms and online sale of their products, then the need to develop stable cooperation and exchange relationships with them and with distributors able to work in the harvesting and the dispatch of fresh food in the local area.

Lastly, they engaged in developing a very advanced platform for food presentation and sale, which can also be adapted to smartphones to enhance ease and the potential audience of all interested users/buyers. The firm, however, has successfully been able to manage critical issues and it has seen a significant increase over the years, not only in the number of products and businesses in its basket, but also in the commercial transactions, characterising itself as one of the most interesting in the Molise region, as for the sale of organic products grown and processed in the region.

Also in this case it is very interesting to capture the path leading to the choice of this specific region, – small, culturally characterized, with a disseminated agricultural knowledge – and the origin of the implementing bodies of a technologically innovative activity – globetrotters, with a high educational level, ethically engaged. The link between adoption of technologies and digital platforms is strengthened, also in apparently remote fields like agriculture and sheep herding, both as an element of sustainable development and of democratisation in market access and identification of the areas with aware and responsible consumers' behaviour.

In this sense, new digital technologies applied to agriculture seem to be part of that process of participatory building of a new food citizenship binding responsibility toward environment, circular economy and equity, reduction of both economic and cognitive inequalities, opening of new markets for both the agri-food sector and for tourism.

Digital digressions in Latin America

Within the project TraPP, the research centre BIOCULT discussed and presented together with the project partners, beside the observation during the planned field visits, some interesting comparative cases. This is the case of the fieldwork conducted by the writer in the pastoral context of Argentinean Patagonia, together with my colleague Paula Gabriela Nuñez from Universidad de Rio Negro in Bariloche, and of the research on the

use of new online communication technologies conducted by Bolivian colleagues, project partner in the area of Macharetì, one of the 11 territories of the indigenous Guaranì people in Bolivia, in Bolivian Chaco (Bazoberry, Andìa 2019).

In this region, in particular, the fifteen local communities, a total of about 3500 inhabitants, resumed farming and stock-farming activities especially since the Nineties, after a period of neglect and migration. Among the key factors of this process of returning to the land and making the best use of the territorial indigenous specificity, rural upland communities began using communication by means of new media, combining it with the longer widespread radio communication and social networks, in order to increase the visibility of their territories, to strengthen and sustain the dissemination of local contents, aiming mainly at forms of cultural expression and at daily life, to challenge, at least partially, large retail networks and to market directly their own agri-food products, their tourist destinations, accommodations and catering services in their rural areas. All this resulted in dedicated pages on social networks, documentaries specifically focussed on the Guaranì area in the Capitanìa de Macharetì, filmed and published during the pandemic period, online purchasing networks for agri-food products, addressed to the main Bolivian urban centres (Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, El Alto, La Paz).

At the same time, research was carried out on the use and diffusion of digital technologies and media in that area, which revealed the dominance of simple communication channels like mobile phone and Whatsapp and a significantly lower usage of Facebook and of email messages, the latter being used for communications within families affected by larger migration processes. In some cases, digital communications are used to reach the relatively isolated population in these areas, for political purposes and to spread specific information campaigns, while media and new media are also used to influence their choices and mentality. The Bolivian colleagues' research extended to cover the wider scope of indigenous and afro-descendant communities in various Latin-American regions, searching for evidence of minorities' struggles for the access to land and dissemination of their campaigns and battles in the Web. This research states the idea that ICT do play a role, in this time, in local actors' shift from "consumidores de informaciòn, a participar como productores de contenido" (Bazoberry, Andìa 2019: 13).

The students in the working group who, in the Online International Course within the project EARTH, had decided to look in depth into the

question, conducted some interviews with the designers and leaders of this project17, that is developed in another area of Bolivian Chaco, i.e. in Tierras Altas18 in the rural municipalities of Laja, Tiwanku, Achocalla in connection with the cities of La Paz and El Alto).

The idea originated in 2016 from a concept by the businesswoman Veriozka Azeñas, for the main purpose of supporting the needs of some farmers' households involved in a project of marketing for quality agricultural products strongly linked to the local area at a fair price. Partners of the project were, most interestingly, students, researchers, activists and voluntary workers as well as, obviously, families from the concerned rural area. The project was based on bottom-up information and a circular economy involving knowledge and an ethical, fair and regenerating adjustment in production and business as for the agroecological crops of those families. Communication concerning the stories of this somehow extreme agriculture and of its quality products occurs over a multitude of different channels: social networks, digital platforms, setting up of performances, meetings, tasting sessions, which can raise awareness both of agri-food products, transformed in dishes by leading chefs, and at the same time of the issues relating to fair and sustainable consumption and operational social innovation in agriculture. On several occasions, during interviews and public presentations of this project, Vierozska Azeñas defined this project as absolutely innovative for an area that is relatively far from the major tourist routes and global distribution; it is, firstly, a social growth initiative that not only identifies carefully market niches, but is also to carry on a process aiming at developing skills, knowledge and trust among the inhabitants of Terre Alte, also by means of digital technologies (Azeñas 2021; FAO 2020; COPLUTIC 2015).

As regards the ethnographic research still on-going in Argentinean Patagonia together with Universidad de Rio Negro en Bariloche, a brief mention will be made of the impact of online technologies and communication channels, which in recent years has increasingly become an identifying and guiding feature of spaces and mobility in the territories.

During a fieldwork, we actually realized that in Northern Patagonia, like in the area of Ingeniero Jacobacci and Chaifùl, where transhumant shepherds move, previously anonymous places along Linea Sur have been recently indicated in the real and symbolic geography of nomadic pastoralism among the historical regional reference points along the ancient pathways. Together with

Paula Gabriela Nuñez, the Argentinean colleague with whom I coordinated the research project on transhumance and pastoralism as elements of the intangible heritage[19], we noted along the road signs that local people use to call "la señal". In the map of the shepherds' path, with a lot of traditional names given to particular uplands and streams or nicknames referring to traditional ancient stories, using that word reveals, like a rift, the new central role that data connection and the possibility of intercepting "the signal" has gained in the practice and the imagery of contemporary shepherds, even in an area which is usually referred to as held back, traditionalist, characterised by forms of extensive farming and sheep herding, not industrialised, substantially backward and not integrated in the circuit of national and global markets, on the contrary somehow crushed and oppressed by them.

Therefore, the appearance of a signalling place with a significant pastoral interest – we could say – for daily life, work, spatial orientation of Patagonian transhumant shepherds seemed to direct also our considerations on new ICT, artificial intelligence, planning according to the principles of smart agriculture and communications via new media e social networks that are changing, and will increasingly change, the rural context in the next years and decades.

New visions and digital blunders

The various studies presented here led to a major reflection about dominance and concentration of the communication and information media in the hands of few people, the hegemonic forms affecting development and multilateral corporations: for instance, the use and the drawing up of statistics, building and monitoring educational/informative platforms, development costs of communication forms and channels that are cross-cutting and really inclusive, as well as the costs of connectivity, are still prohibitively expensive for some categories or, going back to Europe and Italy, especially in inner and peripheral regions in the South, hardly attractive for telecommunication companies (the famous issue of the last mile of the network), thereby excluding from the broadband fruition hidden and mountainous areas, once again excluded also from virtuous information processes and sustainable development.

It is no coincidence that a specific field of the National strategy for inner areas [Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne][20] concentrated on this topic;

the strategy pointed out that for the rehabilitation and revitalisation of the most peripheral, mountainous, depopulated areas of the Country, access to broadband and e-infrastructures, as well as the know-how concerning use and implementation of instruments, platforms and online archives are a crucial element in the local regeneration path, which is the subject of so much discussion, especially after the pandemic period, within the substantial funding earmarked for technological transition in the Recovery and resilience national plan and in Next-Generation EU21.

Resulting from all these experiences and the case study is the following, pretty interesting, element: at a certain point, all of them get institutional support, in this case from Europe, with measures concerning innovative start-ups and the launch of e-commerce businesses, in particular funds for the so-called establishment phase in the Programma di Sviluppo Rurale or in other specific measures designed to develop business competitiveness and innovation. At the same time, the personal histories of their promoters testify the difficulty, still common among farmers, in accessing a direct distribution of their own products online, unless the subjects got an advanced training or lived and/or studied long enough abroad, which would have caused a radical change in perspective as regards management and development of their own farming activities.

It's also worth noting that, despite the various policies at a national and a regional level firmly support the development, also in the agri-food field, of an innovative economy, based on new ICT and digital platforms, just few companies undertake projects based on technological innovation in agriculture and on e-commerce, which suggests a certain cultural resistance against this trend toward transformation of farming even among the young or some difficulty in acquiring the skills required to develop such an approach to the management of their own companies and the advertising of their products.

Some asymmetries undoubtedly persist in the use and diffusion of digital technologies in agriculture, a 'rural digital divide', a political-economic nexus dividing two geo-cultural situations: the agro-pastoral areas, next to the big economic and distribution poles that also have-infrastructures able to support this advanced use; other areas, in some cases even lacking the connection to the broadband – like some of the interior areas in Italy, if we just mention our country – and the support needed to extend an advanced and aware use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence to farming.

In this sense digital agriculture, or agriculture 4.0, together with the so-called *smart farming* define new environments and landscapes in their representation and mapping, influence agricultural *policies* and the participation processes to the *governance* of rural development and enable the current rural and ecological transition processes, while at the same time raising questions about their consequences in terms of sustainable development.

On a more strictly theoretical and methodological level, this wide and innovative search field determines a very interesting scope of transdisciplinary cooperation.

Starting from the first decade of the new century, more and more studies were carried out on the transformation in everyday life caused by the widespread use of digital technologies and communications. The most effective considerations were about value chains in the food systems, implying the entry of major sensitive high-impact data into the practices of agriculture, livestock farming and farming management, for instance weather forecast, pre-calculation of the fitosanitary product impact on a certain crop or farm, detailed forecast about consumption and distribution costs, as well as large scale analysis of market flows and prices. The use of these large quantities of data in agriculture has therefore increased with an essentially predictive view, giving a strong guidance to production choices and selection of crops and breeds, often deciding for a reduction of plant and animal biodiversity, but above all reducing drastically in most cases the relational, human, subjective intervention in farming.

The really innovative factor, maybe, of such knowledge circulation and exchange between agriculture and sheep herding, on the one hand, and digital technologies and communication forms, on the other hand, is that the most innovative researchers draw their ideas increasingly from strongly localised practices and knowledge, both with a view on conduct and *patterns* online and in technological and IT design; they even draw from observation and examples of animal and plant behaviours, of the different forms of life and natural reproduction, in order to develop more and more innovative forms of artificial intelligence or of rationalisation in the use and management of resources. Maybe it is exactly in this circularity between nature and science, technologies and ways of life and out of this original and deceptive nexus that we can find the matrix of any creative thinking and behaviour, as well as the real secret of a sustainable management of the relationship between

human beings and environment, between human beings and more-than-human living beings.

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Beninese *Vodun* in the Network: Between Social Media and Marketability

P<small>IETRO</small> R<small>EPISHTI</small>

Introduction

The *Bistrot des Étoiles* is a small building with light blue walls, located at the edge of the road leading from the *Grand Marché* of Porto-Novo down to the lagoon, where it abruptly ends in front of the concrete skeleton of what was intended to be the new seat of the *Assemblée Nationale du Bénin*[1]. It is a thoroughfare for many people and on those yellow seats, it's easy to find vendors seeking rest, *zemidjan* (local motorcycle taxi) waiting for customers, and employees from the nearby prefecture absorbed in an everlasting lunch break. Ave Tozé has got his office here, at a table inside. Much could be said about him and the character he seems to be interpreting: *Chevron*'s moustache, Bluetooth earphones, and a *kufi* with a strange tassel attached, resembling more like a *fez* than a local headdress. He confides that "nowadays, to be a *féticheur*[2], you have to work hard" showing his awareness about a changing world to which – whether you like it or not – you have to adapt.

Ave Tozé is a *vodun* practitioner from Porto-Novo. "Ave", the nickname by which he is commonly known, means "*vodun* bearer"[3]. This is, in fact, the status he holds in the organisation of the temple of the *grand prêtre* Tozé Gbêgnon, his father. His role is prestigious; however, he will likely not inherit the leadership of the important temple of Djêgbê[4] community, as this responsibility will fall to his elder brother Janvier, the firstborn. Like many residents of his neighbourhood, Ave considers himself a Muslim, but he regularly practices the *vodun* religion: he offers oracular consultations to believers and clients, manages some personal *vodun*, and supports his father during ceremonial occasions involving the family temple.

It is not particularly simple to provide a clear and concise definition of the *vodun* religion, largely due to the nature of this polytheistic cult, which is closely tied to the personalities and individual practices of its priests, who do not share a universal text or a common practice. However, for our purposes, it will suffice to understand vodun as:

> [...] a polysemous term that takes on different meanings depending on the context and ways it is used: it can refer to the individual invisible entities that animate the system of beliefs, rituals, and knowledge, which is also called *vodu*; or it can define those objects made by humans – with wood, terracotta, iron, or clay – or by nature – such as an animal, a tree, a termite mound, a watercourse, a spring, or any other meaningful place or phenomenon – and inhabited by such entities (Brivio 2012, p. 7, tr.).

This set of practices and symbolic meanings does not necessarily stand in opposition to the "truths" of faith espoused by other religions, from which – indeed – *vodun* seems to draw and integrate elements and stimuli. The propensity for syncretism and stratification of meanings makes *vodun* religion a highly dynamic cult system that is able to engage in dialogue with external influences and reinterpret internal ones. In addition, *vodun* acts incorporating or discarding old and new elements depending on their functionality within the complex symbolic, social, and hierarchical system of this cult.

In 2019, I was in Benin to study the meanings and uses of audio-visual in the ceremonial contexts of *vodun*. I often visited the temple of Ave Tozé and his home, who more than once showed interest in discussing the objectives and results of my research and sometimes he asked me to film some ceremonies he performed for himself or for clients. One day, I found him taken up with a small protection ceremony against witchcraft for a Nigerian client who, unable to attend in person, appeared via video call on a smartphone held by one of his children.

It was November 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which was soon to have our society in a tight lock of fear and helplessness, had not yet trained us in the daily   even tedious   use of video calls. Pressed by my questions, Ave Tozé proudly explained to me the advantages of performing ceremonies via WhatsApp video call or through short videos to send to the concerned. This had considerably enlarged his customer base to those who were unable to reach him in person, such as travellers, residents of neighbouring countries like Togo or Nigeria, or members of the Beninese diaspora in Europe and around the world.

The process was relatively simple and inexpensive: preliminary consultations were conducted by phone or online (via WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger), during which the priest suggested the type of ceremony and sacrifices needed and the associated costs. The client would then send the required amount via Western Union or by topping up phone credit to purchase the necessary materials and cover other expenses. On the appointed day, Ave performed the ceremony as if the client were physically there. A "substitute", usually one of his many children, carried out the necessary ritual while holding the phone during the video call or recording a video to be sent later. In the latter case, the client would receive at the end of the ceremony some videos, showing that the ceremony had indeed been performed and the purchased materials fully consumed. To further prove the video was not recorded on another occasion, the client's name was repeated multiple times during the rite.

It was from these episodes, and others known later, that I began to question how communication technologies had impacted the *vodun* religion and the strategies through which Beninese *vodun* practitioners use social media to promote their image nowadays.

For some months, between April and November 2021, I followed about fifteen Facebook profiles of male and female *vodun* priests, *féticheurs,* and "spiritual masters", paying attention to the published contents and to users' interactions, as well as to live videos and older contents already published in previous years. The resulting considerations has been linked to the voices of interlocutors met during two previous fieldwork periods, from February to March and from July to November 2019, trying to reconstruct a common discourse that connects as much as possible "local" and "virtual".

"Tradition" in the age of smartphones

The approach necessary to better understand the transformations currently affecting *vodun* religion is twofold. On one hand, it is essential to point out the syncretic capacity and polyphonic dimension that make *vodun* particularly receptive to external stimuli and capable of incorporating them. On the other, it is necessary to attempt a not-so-simple assessment of the symbolic impacts on worship brought about by these hybridisations of practices.

However, it would be a mistake to view the transformation processes experienced by this religion as just a recent event caused by external influence

and, as Angelantonio Grossi (2020) argues, "explaining these phenomena as local reactions to the effects of economic-political changes is, besides being an unhelpful interpretation, misleading in terms of questioning and decolonising the categories with which we view the world" (*id.*, p. 346). The risk investigating the correlations between technological tools and so-called "traditional" religions is that of portraying the latter as asynchronous elements, belonging to a time and space different from our own. Understanding *vodun* also as a historical product is necessary to reveal the political dimension of this worship, permeated by a coexistence of forms of power and both internal and external conflicts. Although this does not always provide a coherent picture of this religion, it helps to restore a dimension of contemporaneity to our interlocutors, bringing them out of an aestheticized conception of a "people without history" (Wolf 1982).

As Nancy Munn states (1970), in a global world, new objects appear (and disappear), which are capable of leading subjects and their thoughts in multiple directions, thus enabling individuals and communities to become something different from themselves. Technological novelties, from smartphones to blenders, from video cameras to the latest model of sunglasses, exert a powerful seductive charge – often precisely because they are *something new* coming "from outside" – and some of these are absorbed by local uses or cults, impacting them.

A "material" approach to the study of culture and religion[6] suggests a permeation between object and subject, implying that subjects and objects are mutually constituted: "men and women create and use objects and, in turn, are created and defined – in terms of identity, value, and more – by these same objects" (Ciabarri 2018, p. 9). A local example can be found in video production tools, now fully integrated into the *vodun* ceremonial systems of Benin, to the point of becoming essential for validating the economic prestige and authority of some public rituals and ceremonies, thereby also reinforcing the credibility of what is being performed.

Studies on the material aspect of religions (Fabietti 2014) integrate effectively into the extensive literature about the role of media in the creation of religious experience (De Vries 2001; Meyer and Moors 2006; Morgan 2008), which understand religion itself as a practice of mediation in which media make possible – if not define – the experience of the transcendent. These studies have paved the way for an interesting field of inquiry into the process through which media have been adopted and "naturalised" (Meyer

2008) within religious practices. In this context, it is interesting to observe how the global spread of social networks is encouraging new strategies for the construction and redefinition of some figures commonly perceived as custodians of a part of culture and knowledge regarded as more "traditional", such as *vodun* priests and *féticheurs*.

In Benin, access to the Internet has long been hampered by a lack of technological resources. Consequently, as in many other places, the real "digital revolution" took off with the arrival on the local market of affordable smartphones and mobile phones with data connection. Today, the number of Internet users in Benin is growing exponentially, and many, especially the younger generation, look at the Internet and social media as a possibility to promote their personal image and enhance their working profile, expanding their network of contacts and customers.

In relation to these trends, some depositaries of *vodun* knowledge proved not to adhere passively to the demands of "modernity". Various priests have extensively utilised the most effective communication tools by creating YouTube channels and Facebook pages (Grossi 2017) to promote their *vodun* and their abilities in a sort of religious marketplace that unequivocally bound to expand further over the next few years.

Inevitably, these issues lack a long-term analysis due to the relatively recent nature of the reported cases and their propensity for a rapid and not even predictable development. Nevertheless, I believe that these phenomena can still be analysed in light of some considerations already emerged in the literature which has explored the dynamics arising from the encounter between *vodun* religion and new form of worship such as evangelical churches (Tall 1995, Mary 2002, Henry 2008), anti-witchcraft cults (Terray 1979, McCaskie 2005, Brivio 2012), or tourism impact (Forte 2009, Landry 2015); in attempting to bring out historical and cultural backgrounds of these processes, as well as to make out the strategies implemented by *vodun* practitioners in order to turn communication technologies and the use of social media to their own advantage.

From the "real" to "virtual" field

As Steve Jones (1999) argues[7], the Internet presents certain methodological challenges for conducting ethnographic research, due to its complex struc-

ture and rapid transformations, which make it difficult to focus on a specific research object. Even if researchers interact with written texts (or video and photographic documents), those on the Internet are not preserved as they would be in an archive. Instead, they change, disappear, or are replaced by others.

Among the profiles selected for this research, some have stopped publishing content; others have resumed after varying lengths of absence; still others have continued to publish with different frequencies. Although it is not feasible to propose a strict categorization of the profiles analysed, it is possible to identify certain elements that either unite or differentiate the online activities of the priests. These elements can help trace recurring types and typical features, which could provide useful insights into understanding the purposes and modalities of social media use by different individuals.

The first examined profile is that of Dah Gnancadja (Kandja)[8], a priest from Porto-Novo who defines himself as a "grand maître spirituel iffa". Despite his Facebook page is not particularly popular, he publishes many posts, videos, and comments several times a day. Dah uses his page primarily to sell products described as miraculous, such as magical perfumes or soaps for preventing and curing physical problems (like erectile dysfunction, haemorrhoids, stomach pain, and more), talismans or artifacts to gain wealth and attract "bonne chance" or amulets to protect against enemies and misfortunes. In response to requests for information and details posted under his "magical recipes" and photos of mystical objects, he simply invites users to contact him on WhatsApp.

The videos, photos, and instructions he posts, sometimes in the *goun-gbe*[9] language, suggest that Dah's profile addresses mainly an audience med up of users from his country or in the nearby area of Togo and Nigeria. It is likely that his profile belongs to a young priest who does not appear to be connected to a "historical" family *couvent* or to a personal temple, which he would have otherwise made public by name or images.

Dah's use of Facebook seems oriented towards finding new clients, already followers of the *vodun* religion, who are interested in his products or who believe in the validity of his ceremonies. In this respect, it seems that Dah uses Facebook to build – or perhaps to create – a network of contacts, parallel to those held by other priests and on which they base much of their religious authority, as well as their economic gain. In this sense, he manages to emancipate himself from the traditional hierarchical system, which is

based on kinship (Hamberger 2013), by expanding his field to communities of "strangers" and thus creating alternative networks.

The profile of Togbé Gankpangnan[10] has a different character. He is a "consultant et guérisseur traditionnel" [consultant and traditional healer] as well as a Beninese jazz musician and he resides in Ouidah, the so-called "sacred city" of *vodun*. At first glance, the selection of photos on his profile appears much more curated than Dah's: they are mostly images of him in traditional costumes, or depicting places or objects related to *vodun* religion, accompanied by brief descriptions. Quickly scrolling through the photo gallery, immediately stands out the presence of several white tourists who seem to accompany him to temples or simply pose together. It's not difficult to understand that Togbé works more as a tour guide than a priest, although there are several photos and videos of him performing small ceremonies or consultations in a temple presumably managed by himself, a relative, or a close acquaintance.

These figures, straddling the roles of *vodun* practitioners and tour guides, are not rare in Benin. Anthropologist Jung Ran Forte (2009) describes the vicissitudes of Mahinou, one of her interlocutors, involved in a dense network of tourist and religious relationships, which led herself to be crowned as priestess in order to establish her own *vodun* temple where she could organize *vodussi* dance shows for tourists. It is evident that the possibility to communicate with a global audience, with whom it would otherwise be impossible to interact, represents perhaps the main feature of Internet use. In this regard, the profile of "Notre culture Vodou prêtresse nana fabuleuse" is particularly interesting for two reasons: firstly, the sizeable audience that follows her publications, and secondly, because Nana "the fabulous" falls into the extensive category of healers and healing experts in traditional medicine who offer consultations and sell *médicaments*[11]. Nana too, sells on her page perfumes, oils, and incense with "magical" or "miraculous" properties, although these are clearly industrial products and not made by her. However, the main content of Nana's posts, and the reason she opened her page, goes beyond simply selling a few products. In the description of her Facebook page, she writes: "I am a priestess from Togo, a West African country near Benin. The two countries are the main cradle of the *vodun* cult in the world. I love my culture and I asked myself: why not create a page that promotes this culture of which I am so proud? Indeed, *vodun* constitutes the root of Sub-Saharan Africa" (tr.). The geographical indications, the brief descrip-

tions of *vodun*, and the exhortation: "Come on, tell me if you remember every day where you come from, or not?" (tr.) clearly suggest that Nana's profile address above all an international audience of African emigrants or their descendants. Her posts contain descriptive information about *vodun*, passages of local history, and explanations of some traditions, with the aim of making her public "rediscover" their African roots.

The cases considered have highlighted the types of content conveyed through social media by some local *vodun* practitioners, outlining their purposes and the trajectories to expand their network, sell products, or build up their personal image. However, if according to Brivio (2012, p. 8) "polytheistic religions do not aspire to proselytize" it is necessary to integrate these subjects in a broader context that can reveal the dynamics underlying these practices, connecting them to the historical and political trends concerning *vodun* religion in Benin.

From Ouidah '92 to the net

Following the economic crisis of the late 1980s and the political crisis that ended the military dictatorship of Mathieu Kerekou (1972-1990) with the election of Nicéphore Soglo as President of the Republic of Benin in 1991, a plan was displayed to set up a tourism industry in hope of boosting the growth of the stagnant Beninese economy. Lacking significant natural resources, beaches suitable for tourism, and great architectural landmarks, the government aimed to create a national culture capable to display a coherent sense of tradition, of which *vodun* became a unifying symbol.

Through a process of patrimonialization, *vodun* was elevated from a local cult to a historical-cultural heritage specific to the Beninese region and its surroundings, thereby defining – inevitably – its peculiar characteristics (Banegas 2003). This integration was not neutral. A rough distinction between *vodun* and witchcraft was engraved with the aim "to free the cult from the unorthodox old practices" (Brivio 2012, p. 247), and to offer an aesthetically and ethically acceptable image of this religion. Ultimately, a marketable image.

According to Forte (2010), the period between 1990 and 1995 was characterised by a dual movement: the "re-traditionalization" of the public sphere through the honorary restoration of the so-called "têtes couronnées"

[crowned heads] – the wide and picturesque group of local princes and kings –, and a process to arrange these personalities into institutionalised forms, such as unions of traditional healers and other forms of organisation of the religious hierarchies[12].

In recent years, since the election of Patrice Talon as President of the Republic in 2016, tourism has been one of the key projects to revive the Beninese economy, and one of the pivots is to make *vodun* a real driver for the development of cultural tourism in the country. Talon himself, during the presentation conference of the PAG 2016 (Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement) [Governamental Action Programme], asserted that "our culture is *vodun* and must be valued and sold, and our values promoted worldwide [...] we should take advantage of culture and be able to sell it, and to do so, we must simplify it" (tr.).

Those were not vague intention. They are reflected in current government projects, such as the construction of a *vodun* museum in Porto-Novo and the creation of the "Route des Couvents" a road linking some *vodun* temples of Adjarra, Ouidah, Abomey, Grand-Popo, and Kétou, in order to establish a tourist circuit[13]. These operations gained both criticism and praise from believers and not only, regarding the state's involvement in religious matters, the willing to exploit *vodun* for tourism, and the boundaries between cult and culture.

As early as 1995[14], the then-president Nicéphore Soglo established and inserted it into the calendar of national celebration the "fête nationale de vodoun" [*vodun* national celebration], held annually on 10th January on the beach of Ouidah. This event has significantly contributed to *vodun* culture being regarded the main expression of Benin's cultural wealth (Juhé-Beaulaton 2009). Celebrations around this date attract thousands of tourists, both local and foreign, making it one of the country's main public events.

Like most of contemporary great events, *10th of January* is widely promoted through online channels of more or less extemporaneous tourist guides, in a form of hospitality and organization often straddling formal and informal dimensions. Considering the lack of a real sector, the regulation of the tourism market is still largely entrusted to individuals or small groups who self-promote as tour guides, "disclosing a space in which anyone can be a potential *cultural specialist* and *cultural translator*". (Forte 2009, p. 437). In this liminal space operate some of the *vodun* practitioners present on the

Internet, ambiguously positioned between traditional religious figures and "cultural mediators" able to respond to the increasingly insistent demands of Western tourists for "pure and genuine authenticity" and "out-of-the-ordinary experiences" (Graburn 1977).

The case of George Floyd: between the diaspora and the "African roots"

The historical and political process of *vodun* patrimonialization helps understand how the construction of the online identities of some Beninese *vodun* practitioners fits perfectly into a socio-economic rationality, demonstrating a clear and conscious ability of these figures to read and interpret the dynamics pervading media and global tourism. Describing the online trajectories of some Ghanaian *traditional priests*, Grossi (2020) argues that they, addressing to an audience that is not necessarily from Africa, "move between urban environments and digital networks, re-mediating the imagery of the power of traditional spirits and performing translations capable of connecting worlds perceived as distant" (*idem*, p. 345).

An emblematic example in this context is found in some images and videos shared on the profile of Houna Daagbohounon, a prominent priest of Ouidah, who is defined as the "supreme spiritual chief of *vodun Hwendo*". Scrolling down his Facebook profile, he appears portrayed in various photographs from formal occasions and great ceremonies (numerous from the *10th of January* festival), often in the company of Western tourists, or in some sermon videos urging peoples to "remember their ancestors and reconnect with their African roots".

Of all the videos, one is worth mentioning. It was published on 2nd August 2020, is titled "*Vodun* ceremonies for George Floyd and other Afro-descendants and victims of police brutality led by His Majesty Houna Daagbohounon" and includes hashtags with the names of Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Manuel Ellis, other African Americans killed by police. The montage begins with the famous footage of George Floyd's murder on 25th May 2020, by Derek Chauvin, a US policeman from Minneapolis, alternates scenes of a great *vodun* ceremony with footage of police violence and protests that inflamed the United States in 2020. Later, a large portrait of George Floyd's face is carried on shoulders by some adepts and held up

during a long and much attended procession through the streets of Ouidah before being placed on an altar along with some *vodun* symbols. Behind the altar, Houna Daagbohounon speaks passionately and, dubbed in English, states that the ceremony has been organised to expresses solidarity of the *vodun* world to all Africans and their descendants in the diaspora who suffer from racism and police violence. He also takes the opportunity to reiterate that "the roots of Africa are of vodon culture" and to thanks Beninese President Talon for his efforts in restoring traditional chieftaincy and promoting this religion. Under the video, also available on the YouTube channel of "*Vodun* Hwendo", numerous comments express gratitude and ask for prayers to *vodun* deities so that this sort of things does not happen anymore.

The case of Daagbohounon is certainly interesting for understanding how some *vodun* practitioners feel comfortable addressing an increasingly global and interconnected audience, using the power of *vodun* deities to take a stand in contemporary discourses (Tall 2005), while simultaneously leveraging the vast reach of the internet to bolster their political authority[15]. As Rosalind Hackett (1998) reminds us, the mediatic dimension of religious experience in Africa is less individualistic and more related to the group of belongings. This group, as it has been outlined in the case of messianic and prophetic cults of the Churches of Christ (Henry 2008), is no longer represented by family lineage – as it historically used to be for *vodun* (Hamberger 2013). Rather, groups are expression of a complex socio-professional stratification that intersects social relationships with individual destiny (Mary 2002), transcending national boundaries while maintaining a sense of collective belonging (Bernal 2014).

Conclusions

The cases considered provides good basis for understanding the use of social media by Beninese *vodun* practitioners. It has been shown how the presence of these figures on the Internet meets to different needs: seeking clients in the case of Dah, maintaining long-distance relationships for Tozé, promoting tourism for Togbé, narrating "roots" and African traditions to peoples of diaspora for Nana, or amplifying political discourse for Daagbohounon. However, these different perspectives should be viewed through a common denominator, without which these characters might seem like dissenting

voices against a religion that bases much of its essence on mysticism and ritual secrecy (Augé 1988). The online presence of *vodun* practitioners fits into a historical-political dimension, which caused and favoured the shift of many aspects of *vodun* from a "cultic" to a "cultural" level[16], in line with the processes of patrimonialization of this religion and the projects of exploitation by the tourism industry.

These processes, started in the 1990s, have undoubtedly fostered the reification of some typical aspects of *vodun* culture, such as ritual dances and sacred music, taking them out from their original context, charging with a surplus of aesthetical value, and simplifying their meanings. It is inevitable that this synthesis into a "museum *vodun*" clashes with a religious dimension that, when extracted from its network of social, political, and economic relationships, effectively ceases to exist (Asad 1993). Although many priests view the internet and patrimonialization processes as resources, it is also important to acknowledge the repulsion expressed by some more orthodox *vodun* figures regarding the divulgation of secrets and rituals to tourists and non-initiates. For example, Silvestre Gogan, a member of an ancient and important family from Porto-Novo[17], despite appreciating the initial spirit brought by the *Ouidah '92* festival, has repeatedly condemned "those who try to get rich with *vodun* putting on false ceremonies to fool tourists"18.

Thus, it is worth questioning whether the exploitation of *vodun* as ethnic capital impacts or not the understanding of collective identity. "Does the commodification of culture" – Fabietti ask – "and the transformation of ethnic identity into a *brand* as well as an *enterprise* are (or not) phenomena without consequences for the future of ethnicity?" (2013, p. 164, tr.). Unfortunately, there is no unequivocal answer to these questions. While it would be speculative to state that any process of transformation can ultimately be neutral, it is important to remember that the dynamics of touristic appropriation affecting *vodun* today are neither the first nor the last with which this religion have been confronted. Anthropology, after all, is not the only discipline asked to face the relentlessness of transformations and it would be a mistake to read such phenomena of change and redefinition affecting *vodun* as mere reduction or impoverishment. The use of social media by *vodun* priests has proved that it does not undermine the belief system of this religion, but rather allows for the exploration of new drifts. To understand these changes, it is necessary to move away from the notion of "tradition" if taken as a timeless and exoticized construct, trying instead

to understand it as a part of a continuous process of selection and creation (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). In this way, what could be mistakenly understood as reduction, turns out to generate new insights capable to expand more and more the field of meanings of this religion, and to enrich it with new ideas of "authentic" and "inauthentic" (Bruner, 2005).

In this perspective, the strategies adopted by the priests and the transformations of practices and symbols reveal that *vodun* is far from being the asynchronous and "traditional" cult that certain stereotypes might suggest. Instead, it has inside an extraordinary poietic capacity to use and reinterpret originally what "comes from outside" (Sahlins, 1985).

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Locked rooms and "digital contact zone"
Pandemic, interruption of everyday reality and construction of a new museum identity: the experience of the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia in Turin (MAET)

Erika Grasso, Margherita Valentini, Gianluigi Mangiapane

Ethnographic collections, meanings and practices[1]

The Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia dell'Università degli Studi di Torino (hereinafter MAET) has been closed for a long time pending a permanent exhibition available that allows to test new valorisation and communication strategies and practices. Meanwhile, the museum is coping with the challenges posed by a sensitive, various heritage that has been inaccessible for a long time: behind the locked doors of the storage areas the objects and the biographies that are at one with them try to cross the threshold and reach the public in spaces and contexts where they can finally be "seen" (Grasso, Mangiapane 2021).

This article builds on the awareness that it is crucial to (re)think the physical and virtual spaces for a deep reflection on the relationship between the public and the museum and on the representation of diversified subjects ("local" and "other") and of European society. The particular situation of MAET requests to guide the museal practices toward more experimental modes and to a re-conceptualisation of the dialogue between academic discourse, museums and community. In this respect, thanks to the initiatives launched in recent years, the heritage got the opportunity to open the doors, exit the storage areas and reach a wider public that was involved by starting debate and research processes, which focussed on the objects, the finds and on the (individual and collective) subjectivities represented in it.

Since the founding of the Museum, the heterogeneous MAET collections experienced periods in which scientific attention and interests preferred or neglected the various *corpora*, according to the personal attitudes and the current "trends" in science. It is undisputed that, until recently, ethnographic collections have received less attention than the precious and dense anthropological collections, (Rabino Massa, Boano 2003); when they were taken into consideration, they were used and exhibit like a mere corollary of other collections, to support a narrative focused on the evolutionary history of human beings (Grasso 2020), even if such a heritage requires particular sensitivities (Ferracuti, Lattanzi 2012; Milicia 2020).

The consideration of ethnographic collections as a scientific research object and as a heritage to be enhanced belongs to a process started at the beginning of the twenty-first century with activities and exhibitions to be mentioned further in this essay. More recently, as we will see, European and extra European art objects and objects of everyday life attracted the attention and interest not only of the museum staff, but also of general public that could get to know them thanks to exhibitions and communication campaigns on the social media.

If it is true that Covid-19 pandemic speeded up the re-thinking processes of relationships between a museum and its public and of creation and self-representation of subjectivities involved in the museum issue, MAET was further urged to necessarily cross the threshold of its storage areas and face the challenge to find ways that promote accessibility to its heritage. The working experience in the last years, in particular the one concerning heritage communication at all stages of the pandemic emergency, prompts us to say that the provocative sentence "The ethnographic museum is dead" (Harris, O'Hanlon 2013, p. 8) gained a further value, since it meritoriously highlighted the critical issues concerning the old museal paradigms and the need to bring new publics and new practices closer together. The interruption of everyday life actually resulted in a creative broadening and an extensive use of social media and it also facilitated understanding the Museum not as a "temple", but as a "forum" (Cameron 1972) for cultural confrontation (Karp, Lavine 1991), where the heterogeneous subjectivities of the institution and the public actually meet. In this respect, it is noteworthy how interesting these processes are, in particular when their object is the material demoethnoanthropological heritage. Furthermore, a crucial moment in collection history, not only the ethnological and anthropologi-

cal ones, was the transformation affecting the international museum world since the Eighties, starting from *Nouvelle muséologie* until more recent movements like *Radical Museology* (Bishop 2013). According to those approaches, a museum should establish itself as an open environment (Vergo 1989), devoted to the re-elaboration of memories and narratives that enable a better and more conscious understanding of today's society and of the power relations and inequality characterizing it. Museology considers museums "as distributive networks in which value travels along transmedial and transcultural lines" (Dewdney et al. 2013, p. 1) and encourages professionals working there to stimulate a greater public engagement during the life of their institution. Together with the approach of museum Anthropology, this new perspective enabled the public to cross physical and cultural thresholds. In this respect, the museum acquires a new role in terms of social inclusion and/or exclusion (Sandell 2003, p. 45), in the belief that art, as a cultural heritage, is not neutral, but it has got an *agency* (Gell 1998) and can play a strong political role (Benjamin 2008).

If we examine the particular history of MAET, attempts to let the objects out of the museum rooms in a different way is clearly a part of a broader process of rethinking the relation with objects, in particular of reflection and re-elaboration of the past and of memory with the goal of decolonisation. As Jean-Loup Amselle suggested, museums and heritage are linked to key political issues and to processes of re-appropriation of values by different subjects (Amselle 2016). These considerations fundamental issue of how can we pursue the decolonisation of a museum characterised by a complex and ambiguous history (Mangiapane, Grasso 2019a; Mangiapane, Grasso 2019b; Grasso, Mangiapane 2022). As Dan Hicks stresses:

> Anthropology museums represent crucial public spaces in which to undertake […] a necessary first step towards any prospect of "decolonisation" of knowledge in these collections (Hicks 2020, p. XIII).

The anthropological approach and the ethnographic method are, in this respect, essential to increase the possibilities of the Museum to be "significant" in its social context (Simon 2016) and to acknowledge museum and archive as dispositives (Grechi 2021). MAET archives and its photographic and ethnographic collections provide a unique opportunity to analyse the meanings that images and tangible culture have been given while defining alterity in the past; to call into question the one-way relationship between

museums and cultures, to acknowledge that museums can be a "contact zone" (Clifford 1997), both physical and virtual, and to look into the asymmetries it is based on (Boast 2011).

The sensitive heritage of MAET

The history of MAET is one of the numerous cases of University museums forcedly closed to the public, starting from the Seventies; it became permanently inaccessible in 1984, and had to suffer a partial loss of interest toward its heritage from the scientific community (Dragoni 1997). In the Nineties it was indeed defined a museum in the dark, despite the fact that exactly in these decades there were attempts to highlight such collections by means of various exhibitions, for instance in 1996 "Luci su 6.000 anni Uomo". At the beginning of the 21st century, some projects edited by institutions, cultural associations or independent researchers working in the Turin district and supported by banking foundations tried to turn the closure into an opportunity to undertake new reflections on the social role of the museum: exhibitions like "Lingua contro Lingua. Una mostra collaborativa" (2008-2009), "L'arte di fare la differenza" (2012-2014) or "A Piece About Us" (2015) involved representatives of migrant communities present in the city, artists and performer in the resignification and reappropriation of museum collections, in particular the ethnographic ones and the Art Brut collection[2] (Pecci 2017; Grasso, Mangiapane 2021). As Mangiapane e Pecci underlined in their essay published in 2019 on the magazine "Elephant & Castle", such initiatives drew on "theoretical scenarios" and "predominantly Anglo-Saxon contexts, in the fields of cultural anthropology and ethnography" (Clifford 1982; 1997; Marcus, Fischer 1996; Clifford, Marcus 2010; Geertz 2019) and on "ethno-museographic practices" in the late twentieth century (Price 1989; Karp, Lavine 1991; Hein 1998; Karp et al.1999; Gonseth, et al. 2002; Peers, Brown 2003; Karp et al. 2006; Clemente 2006; Shelton 2011). In more recent times, a new research and valorisation phase started thanks to the joining to the University Museum System in 2014, a change in the management, entrusted to Cecilia Pennacini, professor of Cultural Anthropology, in 2017 and the transfer of the collections between 2017 and 2020 to a new storage site (and probably a future exhibition site). In particular, new initiatives were launched at the Museum, like workshop rounds, conferences, video inter-

views and exhibitions, inspired by the above mentioned Clifford's proposal of a museum being a "contact zone" (1997), where migrant communities and the scientific community surrounding that Institution could rethink the heritage, above all a by means of decolonisation practices.

New in-depth studies on objects, on the biographies of MAET and of his founder, the anthropologist and psychiatrist Giovanni Marro (1875- 1952), were fundamental to point out the problematic nature of some collections and the different, controversial histories hidden in the museum rooms. The call from ICOM in occasion of the "International museum day" in 2017 to be bold and narrate the inexpressible in museums has only recently been accepted. All the more since MAET preserves quite "sensitive" heritage and stories, i.e. human remains and objects which, according to the definition in "ICOM code of ethics", need to "be housed securely and cared of respectfully" (2004). By extension, we include in the definition of sensitive heritage all remains, objects and characters linked to the museum, which need to be set out with extreme care for a great variety of reasons; starting from Marro, an ardent supporter of the racial laws in 1938 (Alliegro 2011; Grasso, Mangiapane 2022), who put together the various collections specifically for the purpose of demonstrate the superiority of the "Italian race" (Marro 1939) compared to the others (Mangiapane, Grasso 2019a). In those years MAET was in the typical situation of any anthropology museum at the end of the nineteenth, beginning twentieth century, where:

> […] ethnological evidence is displayed together with naturalistic, archaeological or other remains, according to the typical encyclopaedic approach of that time (Lattanzi 1999, p. 28).

The core constituent of the Museum is, in fact, a rich Egyptian anthropological collection of human remains (sensitive materials in the strictest sense), which are skeletal, stuffed or mummified. This collection is now kept partly in the storage rooms of Palazzo degli Istituti Anatomici, in the Turin University, where also all MAET collections are, and partly at the conservation and restoration Centre "La Venaria Reale". If their exhibition is not expected soon, some thinking is needed on possible future ways to explain to a general public this part of the heritage and it is also essential to take into consideration the national and international ongoing debate about such evidence: an example we can mention an article of 2017 entitled "The great laboratory of Humanity. Collection, patrimony and the *repatriation*

of human remains between history and anthropology" published by Maria Teresa Milicia and Elena Canadelli in "Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900". It's also worth mentioning that also one most important ethnographic objects in MAET, i.e. the cotton Zemi taíno dating back to pre-Columbian era and coming from Dominican Republic, is also composed by human skull bones, i.e. frontal bone, upper and lower full arches (Ostapkowicz, Newsom 2012; Pennacini 2021).

Lastly, we need to consider that an important part of the museum heritage comes from locations with a complex history, from psychiatric hospitals of the beginning of the twentieth century or from colonial territories, not only Italian, and they formed in the colonial era "inspired by theories and assumptions that are now outdated from the scientific, political and cultural point of view" (Pennacini 2020). Exactly on this objects the main decolonisation process is going on (Mangiapane, Grasso 2019b; Grasso 2020; Grechi 2021). In an international framework increasingly pervaded by the restitution topic (Sarr, Savoy 2018; Hicks 2020) and characterised by an increasing involvement of *indigenous stakeholders* in the museum politics3, it is for the Museum to reflect on its own identity and on its construction, through more modern research activities and stepping up discussion, confrontation and even criticism. This is particularly true in times of crisis, like the one we have been experiencing since 2020, and it is also favoured by the fact that social media have the potential to reach a wider and more varied audience.

Locked rooms and Digital Contact Zone

In 2020 – 2021 the existence of very many art and cultural bodies was severely put to the test by Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from the lack of adequate support by targeted public politics we often had to witness, the periods of forced closure seem to have accelerated those processes of rethinking the Museum well underway. Their scope include, inter alia, various topics such as the use of virtual and digital instruments when interfacing with the public. The prompt "compliance" of the museum institutions to what has been defined a real *digital turn* is perhaps due to the fact that they were among the first to be affected by the *lockdown* (in Italy already since February 2020). Notwithstanding that, the response of the museums to the pandemic emer-

gency was strikingly not long in coming, on the contrary there were immediate reactions and several different initiatives were proposed online:

> […] not so much to cover any lost revenue due to the lack of entrance fees, but to establish themselves, within a crisis and emergency context, as active subjects rather than passive ones. Several scattered initiatives came spontaneously into being, both at a national and a regional level (Balma-Tivola, Mangiapane 2020, p. 129).

An exponential increase of the interactions on social networks has to be noted, involving a larger and larger museum public, so that the former president of ICOM International Council Of Museums) Suay Aksoy in 2020 declared: "Paradoxically, even with their doors shut, museums have never been more accessible". This implied the involvement of all kinds of institutions: they were enabled to be present and active on the main social media, producing contents and developing occasions of *public engagement*, sometimes totally new. Considering the broad scope of the experimentation, it is difficult to choose which ones are worth mentioning among the ones posted on line from all over the world: they range from sharing contents on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter e Tik Tok to videos and direct screaming on Youtube especially created for that purpose; from the making of *webinars*, *podcasts*, musical *playlists* and radio broadcast to the launch of digital workshops for all ages, often together with museum staff and even facilitated *downloading* some materials; in the end, some entities resorted to the organisation of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).

In general, we could witness

> […] activation of energies, initiatives, attempts, which seem to echo Victor Turner's words when, about the "spontaneous" *communitas* arising following to and in response to an on-going crisis in a certain society, he wrote that in such a condition "a direct, immediate and total confrontation between different human identities" takes place (Turner 1982) (Balma-Tivola, Mangiapane 2020, p.130).

If digital and virtual are not prerogatives of the pandemic period, the perception of the use of technology applied to cultural heritage changed both for the audience and for insiders. Nowadays the dispute between "pros" and "cons" the digital (Mandarano 2021) considered as a possibility to fully

embrace or, on the contrary, to reject and turn away. Actually, perception changed during pandemic (Colombo 2020) and the "old" dichotomy was overcome: it seems anachronistic to think that the on line presence of a museum should be avoided or that it represents a "necessary evil" of our times. It is now established opinion that digital technology has got the power to assimilate and improve the experience of the subjects who have access to, live through and take part in the heritage communication. Moreover, presence on line together with digital-oriented initiatives seem to be part and parcel both of the museum *public engagement* strategies and of the routes undertaken to be more open, inclusive and "significant" (Simone 2016).

> Nowadays it is particularly important to invest in digital communication in order to promote a museum, but also with a view to appealing a broader public that is more and more active on the Internet, because "the Internet has cancelled the boundary between real and digital" and "for the cultural sector eluding the digital agora today means to condemn oneself to irrelevance" (Coccoluto 2019, p. 436) (Mandarano 2021, p. 27).

In view of this statement, the rethinking and redefinition processes of (digital, but not only) museum practices got to a turning point with the pandemic emergency, which imposed them a common condition of precariousness, but experienced in different ways, and revealed the need to find new balances on various levels: theoretic, structural and narrative. These processes involved also, maybe more than others, the ethnographic museums, including MAET, which faced the challenge and the further need for a change from its locked doors and through digital technologies. For the museum, in fact, this is the last item in a long transformation list due to local situations, already described before. We also need to add the considerations and the practices shared by ethno-anthropological museums in Europe and in North America in their recent history and that concern the processes of deconstruction of the colonial perspective, the call into question of the past museum narratives and the testing of new ways to interact with heritage and society.

In this respect, it seems appropriate to ask how MAET took part in the digital turn. Against this background of major change, the museum revitalised the processes, started earlier, of rethinking its own spaces, its own identity and its heritage, using new topics and in parallel to other museum institutions. The enthusiasm for digital experienced in spring 2020 gave

the Museum the opportunity to open its ethnographic and anthropological heritage to a diverse public, even if at the beginning it had to contend with a poor planning of its presence on line, a critical issues common to a lot of cultural institutions. The legacy of this experience, however, is the planning of online activities (started during the pandemic) which are still being taken care of on an ongoing basis.

Specifically, the Museum web site was further improved uploading contents that were disseminated to a wider audience through *mainstream* social networks such as Instagram e Facebook, but also Youtube and Spotify. Since the early tests, we meant to transcend a mere information purpose in the use of virtual, which was typical of the past, through a creative approach. Therefore, timed pages have been conceived and started since March 2020, at the beginning on a weekly basis and then with a less stringent timeframe: it is a set of contents produced according to the formats "Objects off duty", "Objects off duty_Video_Edition" and "Pictures off duty". Every post narrated an ethnographic find or an image from photographic archives, exploring its production context or narrating the story to which it is linked and the process that brought it to the museum. In the case of "Objects off duty Video edition" trainees and undergraduates of the Museum were involved in the production of admittedly amateur clips, which proposed a more vivid and emotional account of the heritage. These pages were quite successful thanks to their simple contents, presented in such a way to be enjoyable to a non-specialist public. In this respect, the videos produced by subjects not belonging to the museum staff or to the management are pretty close to the concept of *digital storytelling,* a narrative instrument which is increasingly applied to culture nowadays, in particular to the material one (Braga 2018).

Beside this kind of heritage communication, all in all a classical one, more experiments were tried out making a musical *playlist* then published on Spotify (@MAET_To) under the title "MAET_ SOUNDSCAPE"; it was the result of a creative dialogue between the museum staff and those (colleagues, graduate students, trainee, undergraduate, students…) who had visited the museum just before pandemic. The latter was asked to propose songs referring to their experiences in the Museum and with its heritage. This operation tries to deconstruct the division between tangible and intangible, which seems to be ill-suited to represent the fluidity characterising artefacts and music (Dei et al. 2011) and to pursue the reconstruction of the "social biographies of the objects" (Kopytooff 1986). The reactions of

the public demonstrated how successful this experiment was: some users, in fact, proposed one or more songs or musicians they wished to be added to the *playlist* and explained the reasons. This way, a first practice of content co-creation and knowledge exchange was drafted.4

Another part of the audience, i.e. families and very young people, was reached thanks to the workshop "Around the world in 60 minutes", organised in cooperation with the University Museum System (thanks to Alessandra Levi, tutor responsible for the educational activities). It is an online game, similar to the Goose game, through which you can discover the creativity and cultural diversity of human societies (Aime 2016; Ingold 2019). The workshop provided the little ones and their parents with the opportunity to discover a different world from the one they experienced every day, (Tassan 2020) thanks to the Museum ethnographic heritage presented and narrated with images, sounds and videos.

There was no lack of more institutional proposals, such as the participation in "The night of the Archives" in two editions of the event "Archivissima" (2020 e 2021). On these occasions a podcast entitled "African women in colonial photography" was recorded on the basis of photo5 collections, and a talk entitled "Images, stones and ideas" was organised, in which [female and male] rapporteurs discussed about the pictures of the Museum showing the Italian Archeological Mission in Egypt between the years 1920s and 1930s. Both initiatives presented a brief analysis and history of those images, together with a critical reading (Grasso, Mangiapane, Valentini 2020). Some webinars were organised through live videos (on Facebook and Youtube), addressing a targeted public composed of "insiders"6.

All those initiatives were designed as actions to awake *engagement* in the audience, aiming at overcoming the most evident critical issues of the Museum, that is to say its closure to the public, an apparent lack of presence on the territory and in the community (academic and local) and the fact that the nature of its heritage is virtually "unknown" to the public. In this respect, the digital turn has deeply influenced the existence of MAET in recent years, as well as its relationship with the public, who literally has discovered for the first time the wealth of its collections. It is hardly surprising, in fact, that the first comments to the posts, a lot of which were written by Turin inhabitants, revealed that most people did not even know that this Museum existed. In any case, the demand for new contents and the increasing curiosity during the lockdown has certainly facilitated that operation,

so that the amount of social media *followers* and the amount of web site users increased immediately, showing encouraging trends7. MAET could reach out to a larger audience, who is still following its activities. The improvement was not only in quantitative terms; actually the interaction with the users grew dramatically: comments, participation in quizzes, demand for more information, "private" messages and sharing of posts, all of them increased. Subsequently it is reasonable to assert that this is quite likely due to the inclusion of subjects other than those working for the Museum, in order to create contents and communication.

Between June and July 2020 an initial evaluation of what has been achieved was attempted by means of an online survey, which provided a better understanding of some features of the virtual public of the Museum: for example, 75.4% were female, 86.2% has got a high level of education, for instance bachelor/master/doctorate, 36.2% is aged between 38-47 and 56.5% lives in Turin. The respondents always expressed a positive assessment of the virtual proposals and over 50% found out the existence of MAET precisely thanks to the social media. One day such information would probably be useful to (re)think the digital activities of the museum and possible ways to involve those people in the co-creation of new initiatives, without overlooking the need to reach also the ones who are not part of the audience yet.

In general, online activities allowed, at least temporarily, to illuminate the darkness that characterized the contemporary history of the Museum and to start a double process (besides making its collections known): on the one hand, the exploitation of all potentialities of the *digital contact zone*8, in order to start a dialogue between public and heritage and, on the other hand, the co-construction of the identity of the Museum itself, together with the public.

Conclusions

The challenges of the pandemic emergency indicate the various ways in which a closed museum like MAET can benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital technology in communicating a sensitive heritage, as the ethnographic one, narrating to the public the stories of the objects making it up, initiating a dialogue with other museums and starting participatory processes that involve different subjectivities. Indeed, the virtual channels

through which the collections came out of the museum rooms and storage areas allowed the development of participatory projects beyond the Eurocentric view which characterized the museum history (Pennacini 2020); and there's more: the strategies pursued in recent years made it possible to reach some kinds of audience otherwise difficult to involve and also to overcome the idea that a museum is just a place dedicated to preserving and displaying a heritage. Since 2018 representatives of diaspora associations have been involved to carry out interviews and videos to be shown later on during exhibitions. The purpose was to reverse the view on the collections, in particular those with an extra-European origin. The response of the public and the involvement of various i subjects (students, curators, university lecturers) confirmed that the museum deserves to be considered not only as a "cultural institution in the service of society and of its development", but also as the "reflection of collective imagery of that society in a certain period" (Lattanzi, Di Lella 2016, p. 139).

In this respect, it is interesting to discuss about *digital contact zone*: virtual spaces in which, like in the museum rooms mentioned by James Clifford, different subjectivities get in touch and start cooperation processes in order to create museum environments suited to promote debate and mutual understanding.

The social role of the museum was somehow tackled and supported, and the physical and symbolic thresholds dividing museum rooms and external world are at least partly overcome. The establishment of relations and dialogues among various subjects, as well as the experimentation of diversified languages and media, allowed the opening of the Museum and offered the opportunity not only to rethink the heritage with greater involvement, but also to lay the foundations for the future of the Museum, both in terms of a new permanent exhibition and of more open and inclusive politics and strategies toward the city and, in particular, the diaspora communities (Di Lella 2019), which can feel represented in its heritage.

Indeed, the digital technology was an unprecedented opportunity for a Museum that had long since closed down and has to face the enormous challenge to define itself before even identifying its own public. As a matter of fact, the proposals and the contents shared and implemented on line enabled it to find itself anew and to begin (again) thinking of itself as a virtual and physical space for meeting and discussion, that aims to be present and significant in the city where it was founded. The priority is now to

systematize the goals achieved and to integrate already tested practices with the participatory and dialogical ones: it is essential to maintain and set up new good sharing practices as well as further research on heritage and its possible audience. For this purpose, the foundations were recently laid to initiate joint work with the Turin intercultural centre (Centro Interculturale di Torino) and with the eighth district of the city (Circoscrizione 8 della Città di Torino), in order to plan a deeper involvement of all citizens, paying particular attention to members of the diaspora communities and to asylum seekers and refugees. In this respect, the experience MAET acquired during pandemic can provide a basis to think of new inclusive museum politics, which favour the *audience engagement* and cultural accessibility with regard to three fundamental points. Firstly, the approach offered by the methods of museum anthropology and participatory ethnography (Lattanzi 1999; Bargna 2019) will guarantee the acknowledgement of power relations and the need of decolonisation that belong to the nature itself of the museum as it was conceived. In this case, the doors would open up also for subjectivities that are often excluded from the museum world, but are often the object of narratives inside it. Secondly, it will be essential to keep in mind the problematic nature of the collections, which are bearer of critical memories and wrong relationships among cultures. In this case, stepping over the threshold means to transform the critical nature of the collections into an opportunity to turn the museum space, physical and virtual, into a meeting space. Thirdly, it will be essential to have both a synchronic and a diachronic view on the history of MAET and on its present time, in order to open its doors and interpret the heritage according to contemporary contexts and goals.

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"I'm Mosuo": an example of narrative of the collective Self on the digital platform WeChat*

Stefania Renda

Introduction

This article examines the public account "I'm Mosuo" on WeChat, in order to analyse how the cultural identity of this ethnic minority group in southwest China is built up through interrelationships which coexist among political, social, cultural representations and their diverse narratives. It will be pointed out how, claiming the uniqueness and "authenticity" of some elements in the Mosuo cultural heritage, this public account gives voice to the self-representation of the cultural identity of this ethnic group.

The Mosuo, whose name in the local language is Na (or Nari), are a Chinese ethnic group who lives between the provinces Yunnan and Sichuan and it is not formally recognised by the central government; it has about 40.000 members. Some of their villages are located around the landscape area of lake Lugu, the natural boundary separating those two provinces (picture 1) which has been a very popular tourist destination for some decades, especially on the domestic tourist market.

Few years after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, an identification and classification work of the national ethnic minorities was started, based on the theory of evolution of the Morgan and Engels's societies – later resumed by Lenin and Stalin – and except during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) this work has been carried on since the mid-1950s to the 1980s. In this historical framework, the Na in

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* During the final stage of writing of this article, I noticed that the account was temporarily disabled. The account administrator informed me that for the time being he couldn't update the contributions, therefore he decided to disable it.

Yunnan were classified as a subset of Naxi, while the ones living in Sichuan as belonging to the ethnic group of the Mongols.
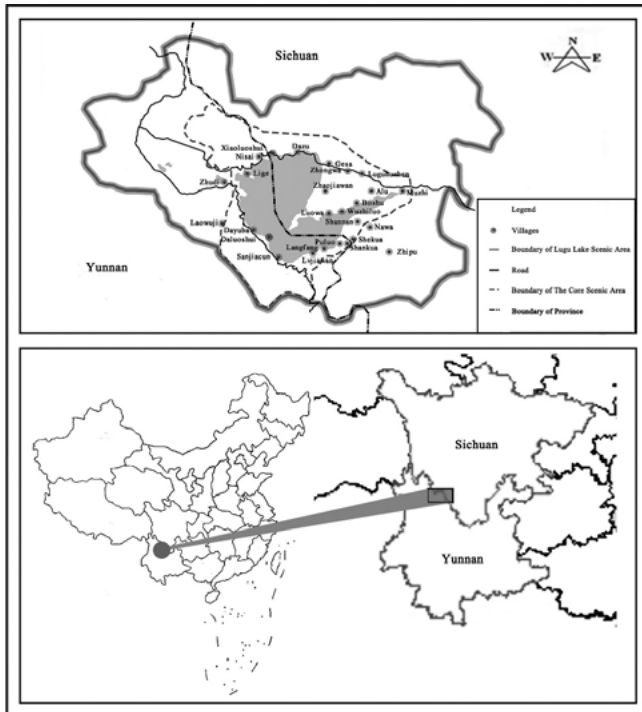
Picture 1

Although the Na are not the only ethnic group living in that geographical area, the matrilineal family structure in which most of them live, as well as the habit of the so-called "walking marriage" or tisese (Shih 2010, p.75), became on the one hand a "marker" that distinguish them from the other ethnic groups, while on the other hand they caused numerous misunderstandings. During the "walking marriage" neither the two partners get married officially, nor do they live together: they keep their residence in the maternal household for the duration of their relationship. The "walking marriage" was often described in terms of sexual promiscuity, both by the first Chinese ethnologists (Yan 1983; Song 1976) and by some tourism professionals, so that the ethnic stereotype about Mosuo arose, i.e. a society "without fathers and husbands" (Cai 2001).

Since my first fieldwork in 2014, I used the platform WeChat every day on my smartphone in order to communicate with my local conversation partners and, after coming back to Italy, I remained in touch with them through this channel. As pointed out by McDonald (2016), smartphones are the most popular means of communication not only in the cities, but also throughout China, including rural areas. When reflecting on the use of Internet and of the social media, we have to take in due consideration disparities in the penetration rates among users living in different parts of the country. For instance, as stated in the study conducted by McDonald (2016, p. 53), Peking has got the highest penetration rate, i.e. 75.3%, while Jiangxi province, in North-East China, has got only 34.1%. Differences exist between urban and rural environments (respectively 72.5% and 27.5%), too and between users of different sexes (56.4% male, 43.6% female), but also according to the age (78.1 % of the users are aged between 10 and 39). In China the appellative "rural" generally designates all open areas, but places considered to be rural in China can differ drastically, ranging from areas which are almost indistinguishable from the city, in terms of transportation and communication infrastructure, to especially remote settings where nobody had computers or Internet connections. However, the romanticized image of the country impressed in the minds of Chinese citizens living in urban areas and of most domestic and international tourist is now far away from the real situation of several areas still defined as "rural". In a Chinese village, like the ones where I conducted my research, one may now reasonably expect to meet a variety of consumer goods and means of communication, including TVs, mobile phones, and internet in almost all households, in addition to rampant house construction, "increasing integration with regional and national market economies, growing levels of literacy, and an awareness of and participation in modernist discourses" (McDonald 2016, p.10).

In order to better understand the use of WeChat in contemporary China and, in particular, in the relevant area of research, it is necessary to briefly mention its multiple functions.

WeChat

WeChat was developed by the company Tencent and entered the Chinese market in 2011, when China was experiencing an export crisis and the State urged for technological innovation (Pieranni 2020, p. 18). Since then the

number of users increased exponentially and, in the first half of 2021, over one billion twenty million were active monthly (see webography: Number of monthly active WeChat users from 2nd quarter 2011 to 1st quarter 2022).

This platform is much more than a social medium, it is a "super app" that, beside sharing photos and videos, sending instant and voice messages and making calls and video calls, provides access to other applications contained therein. This way, just using a single platform, there are a lot of other things that can be done, for instance: call a food delivery service, pay bills, use discounts on purchases, transfer small amounts of money, top up a telephone number, pay for public transport tickets, book airline and train tickets, start marriage and divorce procedures, book a medical examination. Moreover, since the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic it has been possible to obtain the own health code on WeChat, to be allowed into public spaces. WeChat guarantees a better privacy protection compared to QQ, another social network quite popular in China. In fact, on WeChat you are neither allowed to share other users' posts on your own timeline, whereas this function is available on QQ, nor to post pictures or articles directly on another contact person's timeline. On the contrary, you are allowed to comment a WeChat contact person's post, but not to read other users' comments, unless they are shared contacts. In short, WeChat distinguishes itself from other Chinese and "western" social networks because of certain features, which can be summarised as follows (Wang 2012, pp. 38-39):

1. WeChat was conceived to adapt to a "smartphone lifestyle" and it has become an aggregator of applications and services;
2. the posts, or "moments", published on WeChat aim at capturing visual attention, in fact you need to upload at least a picture or a video before being allowed to share a text content;
3. voice messaging is the most used function to communicate on WeChat. In the places of my research this function made it possible for people not familiar with the Chinese writing system to use voice messages to communicate preferably in the local language or dialect;
4. WeChat users tend to use their name in their own account, while on QQ nicknames are used more often and when you open a public account you have to register with your own name;
5. the platform WeChat is still strictly intended for a small community of contacts. Although there are methods to reach strangers on WeChat (for instance using the functions "shake" or "close persons"), in principle

    new contacts can be added through their mobile phone number, WeChat ID or scanning a QR Code, all actions that require a face to face meeting between the subjects who wish to exchange their own contacts;

6. WeChat users have no access to the list of friends of their own contacts nor can they view the "like" and comments of a contact's friends, unless they also belong to their own list. Moreover, if a user writes a comment under a post on a public account, the other users can neither access her/his profile and add it to their own contacts, nor answer her/his comments. In this case only the public account administrator can answer the comments to the posts;

7. on WeChat you can register your own bank account and then transfer and receive some money, offer a cash gift by means of a digital "red envelop" (hong bao) and also use this platform to promote the sale of a wide variety of products, ranging from clothing to food, from handicraft products to precious stones.

    Since some services were not available on that territory, not all WeChat functions could be used in the villages where I carried out my study. For instance, they didn't use the apps to buy public transport or cinema tickets, nor to book medical examinations, but WeChat was regularly used for everyday payments or to transfer and receive small amounts of money. Some contacts of mine used it also as an e-commerce platform, where various products could be put up for sale, for instance textiles worked on a loom, typical of Mosuo handicraft.

    Everyday use of WeChat among local people was mainly linked to its communicative functions between individuals or among groups and to the sharing of "moments" on one's own timeline.

    Moreover, every village had formed a WeChat group in which the most important information was provided. Within the village groups communications took place mainly in Mosuo language – which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group and has got no written form – or in the dialect of Yunnan. As Wang observed (2016, pp.39-40), the voice messaging function enabled the Chinese people older than fifty years to communicate in a simpler way, since for a lot of users it is difficult to digit messages written using Pinyin1. Moreover, in the villages involved in tourism development, it was not rare that tourists and locals exchanged WeChat contacts. As a conversation partner pointed out to me, her WeChat contacts were not local people, they were all visitors she had met in the tourist area.

The use of WeChat reached also the sphere of the local belief system. In some cases, actually, the voice message sent on WeChat by a ritual performer, a Daba – i.e. a ritual specialist of the native belief system – or a lama, who said a prayer or a ritual formula, would remedy his absence and permitted the locals to equally perform the ritual. A Daba I met during the fieldwork told me that becoming a ritual performer used to be a very long and difficult process in the past, since the whole repertoire of songs and prayers had to be learnt by heart, whereas now learning times and methods have changed thanks to the smartphones, which allow the recording of multimedia contents, and to WeChat, which allows also remote interactions with the own Daba teacher.

The public account "I'm Mosuo"

Beside the common accounts that allow interaction with one's own contact network, also official accounts can be followed on WeChat. They may have been created both by individuals and by companies and they are similar to official Facebook or Instagram pages, but the published contents can be seen only by users who chose to follow this account. Among the official accounts pertaining to the concerned area of research, "I'm Mosuo" in particular captured my interest.

I started following the account "I'm Mosuo" because it was suggested to me by a Na contact from Sichuan I got to know by chance on Instagram, after posting on my profile a picture with the hashtag "Lugu Lake". Although in China a lot of sites and applications, among others Google, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, have been blocked by the censorship system known as "Great Firewall", the ones who manage to install a VPN (Virtual Private Network) on their electronic devices can access them bypassing the control system.

The account has been active since 2016, but I started to follow it only in 2019.* The name itself chosen for this official account deserves some consideration. As underlined in the introduction, after the founding of the PRC the Na of Yunnan were classified as Naxi, while the ones living in the region of Sichuan were classified as Mongols, as they claimed to be the descendants of a group of soldiers from Gengis Khan's army which had settled on the territory inhabited by their ancestors around the end of the XIII century c.

e. In the '80s the Na of Yunnan demanded, unsuccessfully, to be recognized as an official ethnic minority. However, in 1997 they were granted by the regional government of Yunnan the classification as "Mosuo" (摩梭人, mosuo ren), even though they remained a subgroup of the Naxi. The ethnonym "Mosuo" derives from Chinese historiographical documents from the IV century e.c., when the term Mosha (a variant of "Mosuo") was used for the first time by the historian Chang Qu, of the eastern Jin dynasty, in his work "The story of Huayang guo", in order to name either the Naxi of Lijiang or the Na of Yongning (Shih 2010, p. 23). The choice of the Na of Yunnan to call themselves and be recognized at institutional level as "Mosuo" indicates the will to draw a borderline, in order to be distinguished first of all from the Naxi, but also from other ethnic groups living in the same area.

The Na of Sichuan, on the contrary, have continued to be classified as Mongols, but at the time of my fieldwork, in the tourist area around Lugu Lake, they presented themselves to the tourists as Mosuo.

Therefore, the name of this account emphasises the concept of ethnicity that is a really complex issue in this particular area of China, as Stevan Harrell (2001) pointed out:

> All ethnicity is local, in the sense that every person who considers him or herself a member of an ethnic collectivity does so in the context of interaction in a local community. But at the same time, all ethnicity, like all politics, is not just local. People in the modern world of nation-states are members of nationally—and often internationally—defined ethnic collectivities of which their local communities are a part, and the dialectical interaction between local, national, and cosmopolitan discourses is what shapes their lives as ethnic citizens of modern nations. Southwest China is one of the places where such dialectical interaction and level-jumping between local and national is at its most involved and complex. […] boundaries here are contingent, shifting, negotiated; ethnicity in one context is not necessarily congruent with ethnicity in another; contexts shift over space and time and particularly from one language to another (Harrell 2001, p. 12).

When I started to follow this public account, I was welcomed through the following automatic message:

> A warm welcome to all friends who will help to spread information about Mosuo people, Mosuo issues and on Mosuo culture[2] through the account "I'm Mosuo".

The automatic message gave also an e-mail address to send the contributions to the page, the address of a group on the platform QQ exclusively for Mosuo users and the WeChat contact of the administrator of the page for any queries. In the synopsis, instead, it was clearly stated what the purpose of the account was:

To pass on, protect and promote the Mosuo culture, showing the world the real[3] Mosuo. It is hoped that each person respects the sacredness of this culture, without building an unrealistic Mosuo culture just for their own profit or to attract tourists[4].

Even if it was unequivocally declared in the synopsis what the aim di this account was, nevertheless I decided to ask the administrator what reasons were hidden behind the creation of an account like that. I quote below what he wrote to me in a conversation on WeChat:

In 2015 I started to study at Fujian University and I noticed that a lot of university mates wished to get a deeper understanding of the culture and history of my ethnic group, get to know Lugu Lake, [Mosuo] clothing etc... As I deeply love my ethnic group, I wish that more and more people in the world could know it, understand it and also came to visit Lugu Lake! That's why I decided to create a public account and share some contents concerning Mosuo[5] culture (Conversation of 25/05/2021).

Although the main reason that drove this young man to create the account was to disseminate Mosuo culture "in the world" –probably the world of the Chinese Han6–, the analysis of the comments to the posts revealed that most of them had been written by Mosuo users. The comments were characterized, on the one hand, by a sense of belonging and by proud and, on the other hand, by the nostalgia of people living far away from their home villages for study or work. Some examples are given in picture 2 below.
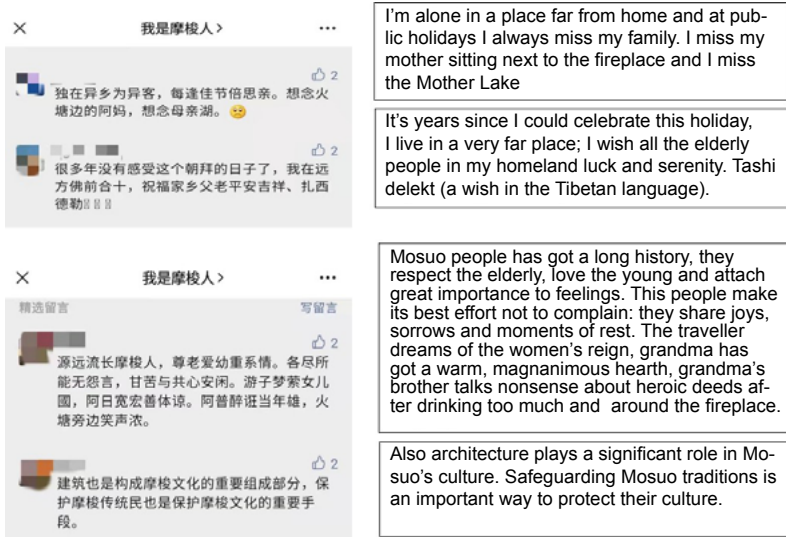
Picture 2

In the account there were three main sections, which in turn had some sub-categories. A general section was added to the latter, where all articles not belonging to a specific category were published in a chronological order. The three main sections broken down by topic and their sub-categories were as follows:

Mosuo Culture	Mosuo songs and dances	Outstanding people ethnic Na
1- Mosuo culture 2-repair misunderstandings 3- poems and songs 4- cultural passing on	Audio and video contents Popular songs	names and categories charities

Table 1: Categories and sub-categories of the account "I'm Mosuo"

In the section named "Mosuo culture" it was possible to identify some elements selected precisely for the sake of self-representation of the Mosuo cultural identity, for instance:

- centrality of the mother and importance of the matrilineal extended family;
- the "walking marriage" and its misunderstandings;
- Daba culture;
- celebration of the Mountain Goddess Gemu[7];
- jiacuo[8] dance;
- Mosuo house;
- farm-based production of sulima wine and pickled pork;
- manufacturing of hand-woven textiles.

Cultural Representations and authenticity

The narratives on Mosuo cultural identity, exemplified by the public account under consideration, are the result of negotiation processes among at least three types of representations: those of the local (self-representations), the political representations and those worked out within the tourist space. Each narrative seems to be closely related to historical and political events of the PRC, which has alternated assimilation politics and politics to promote cultural pluralism, with regard to national ethnic minorities, over the last seventy years.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese government's policies focused on cultural pluralism and on the promotion of minority cultures, for instance, through tourism development strategies in ethnic minority areas and practices for the patrimonialization of their tangible and intangible cultural goods. In the last fifteen years, in fact, the government of PCR has mentioned, celebrated and promoted at various administrative levels (national, provincial, of the prefecture and of the county) the cultural immaterial heritage of ethnic minorities, in other words "ethnographic goods [...] which are not made up by material, long lasting works, but by knowledge, performance, forms of expression handed down by oral tradition and related solely to memory, to practices, to the language of living «bearer" (Dei 2013, p.131). From the early 2010s to 2016 a large amount of objects, artefacts, practices and abilities were designed as intangible cultural heritage in whole China: 1.372 at a national level and 11.042 at a provincial level (Blumenfield 2018, p. 171).

As regards the Mosuo in Yunnan, they didn't succeed in submitting an application for national or international recognition of their heritage, for

various reasons: for instance because the ethnic group Mosuo is classified as a subgroup of Naxi, who already held several UNESCO and national designations. For "ideological" reasons, since some aspects of their culture, such as the costume for the "walking marriage" and the matrilineal extended family contradict somehow national legislation, but also for strategic reasons, as some local conversation partners felt that international protection and a stricter control may have resulted in severe restrictions on territorial development programmes (Blumenfield 2018, pp. 172-173). Even without an official recognition at a national and international level, some aspects of Mosuo culture, such as jiacuo dance, construction techniques of the dwelling complex, the rite of passage into adult life, the celebration of the mountain goddess Gemu and Daba music were recognized by the government of Yunnan province, by Lijiang prefecture and by Ninglang county as intangible cultural heritage. This recognition contributed to disseminate among the locals the notion of "intangible cultural heritage", until recently unknown. As Blumenfield reports, actually:

> When I posted a photo of pounded rice cakes on WeChat, along with a short video of a few Badzu friends working together to pound, roll and stamp them, a friend from the same village now living in Shenzhen commented with a grinning emoji, 'Mosuo intangible cultural heritage!' (Mosuo fei wuzhi wenhua yichan) (18 June 2016). True, this friend can be considered a cultural worker, making his living from representing ethnic minority cultures like his own at a theme park, but his comment still represented a broader diffusion of the concept than I had previously encountered (Blumenfield 2018, p. 184).

Although, as underlined previously, the "walking marriage" and the matrilineal extended family were not recognized at a political-institutional level as intangible cultural heritage, it is exactly around these two distinctive cultural markers that Mosuo cultural identity was built and is still represented in the tourist area. For example, in a lot of tourist shows local performers stage the "walking marriage": at sunset a Mosuo man climbs stealthily to her partner's room, knocks on her window and asks her to let him in. On the other hand, the local government authorities are making an attempt to "civilise" the Mosuo marriage habit. For instance, from 2017 to 2019 the government of Yanyuan County, which administers the Lugu Lake area of Sichuan, organised an event called "Nuptial vows exchange at Lugu Lake", not only for a merely economic purpose, but apparently to make the "walk-

ing marriage" socially acceptable, bringing it into line with the concept of family founded on a monogamous marriage of two individuals of different sex, the only one provided for in the Chinese legal system thus far. Ninety-nine couples from all over China took part in the 2017 and 2018 editions of this event, while in 2019 sixty-six couples did. The participating couples, dressed in the traditional Mosuo costumes, received the blessing of Daba ritual performers and then ventured on jiacuo dance.

Who are, then, the "real" Mosuo that the administrator of the considered public account wishes to make known to the world? The ones represented in the tourist area and/or in the events organised by local government authorities? The issue can be questioned proposing a discussion on the notions of authenticity, cultural identity and intangible cultural heritage.

In the academic sphere the concept of authenticity started being deconstructed in the '80s, also thanks to the reflexive turn in ethnographic practice. Authenticity was no longer considered as a value category to be attached to the so-called "traditional" societies and their cultural practices; it was viewed as a product of modernity, "expression of an individualism that assigns to the author responsibility for authentic creation" (Bortolotto 2011, p. 8). Following the line initiated by Hobsbawm's and Ranger's studies (1983), this discipline has placed its interest on the study of the so-called "invented traditions" and the construction of their authenticity (Handler 1986, pp. 2-4). When in 2003 UNESCO established the new category of intangible cultural heritage, intended to collect representations and practices which are recognized by the bearers themselves as symbols of their own cultural identity, most academic anthropologists pointed out several critical issues. A lot of scholars actually thought that the policies introduced by UNESCO to promote the safeguard of the intangible cultural heritage would fuel that culturalist approach to authenticity which has become obsolete in the academic sphere. UNESCO, however, stressed that authenticity had been officially abolished as an identifying criterion at intergovernmental level. Anyway, as Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (quoted in Bortolotto 2011, p. 15) remarked, when the notion of authenticity stopped being used as analytical category both in the academic sphere and the political-institutional environment, local communities used it to claim their cultural rights. Taking on the function of a "there and back" category, the concept of authenticity was shifted from a scientific to a social framework. The notion of authenticity, originally exported by anthropologists into the groups they were studying,

has become a means used by the same social actors to claim their diversity and uniqueness by way of a reflexive use of culture (Bortolotto ibid.).

According to Turini (2020, p. 39) in the case of the Naxi's dongba culture, also the notion of authenticity of the Mosuo cultural identity is conceived at three different levels: a political one, a social one and a cultural one. In a political perspective the notion of authenticity is built by the narratives elaborated about the cultural traditions of minority groups by the Chinese State, which recognizes the handover of just some cultural aspects to the detriment of others. In this context, the patrimonialization practices carried out by the Chinese government help giving legitimacy to the selection/exclusion process of Mosuo cultural traditions to be protected and passed on. In a social perspective the notion of authenticity is constructed, on the one hand, by the interaction between tourists and locals, by the expectations of a tourist's imagery about what is other-than-oneself, exotic, embodied by ethnic minorities and their cultural traditions; on the other hand, by elaborations on the tourists processed by the locals, who try not to disappoint their expectations, for instance by "staging" the walking marriage. Lastly, in a cultural perspective, the notion of Mosuo's authenticity is made up by the efforts and the elaborations local people implement in the public and private space in order to represent those uniqueness and diversities they recognise as representing their cultural identity. The three levels of representation of cultural identity described above – political, social and cultural–, are not separated from one another, they are related and contribute dynamically to build the concept of cultural identity of this ethnic group.

Conclusions

Internet and social media – WeChat in our case study –, are integrated in individuals' backgrounds and they take on different meanings and usages according to the political-social contexts and regions of the world in which they are used. They are a part of us, since they represent an extension of our ways of thinking, acting and being, and they are present in our daily life (Biscaldi, Matera 2019, p. 11).

The use of social media allowed for new potentialities in communication and in

content circulation, enabling cultural diversities to emerge and trigger new differentiation and self-representation processes (Biscaldi e Matera 2019, p. 11).

The official account "I'm Mosuo" represents a kind of counter-narrative compared to the often misleading news about this ethnic group generally published on the networks, which mainly concern the habit of the "walking marriage".

It is interesting to note that the topics chosen by the account administrator, which we could define as a process of "cultural editing" (Barber 2007, p. 177), left no room to the narrative of other social and family organisations in Mosuo society, which are less common, but do exist: the patrilineal and patrilocal one and the neolocal one. For instance, although the account administrator came from an area in Yunnan where patrilineal Mosuo lived, he never mentioned this detail. On the contrary, in the "cultural editing" process, the Mosuo matrilineal extended family received extended coverage: together with the "walking marriage" it has actually been for years one of the tourist markers of the culture of this ethnic group. In other words, as regards the family system, the given picture of Mosuo society was consistent with the tourists' imagery, which was co-constructed over the years by stakeholders of the tourist sector, by government institutions, by tourists and by the locals themselves. On the contrary, as regards the "walking marriage", the Mosuo counter-narrative tried to restore dignity to this cultural practice emphasizing the fact that those partnerships were monogamous, therefore comparable to the relation between spouses.

Therefore, the public WeChat account "I'm Mosuo" can be considered, a cultural working out that, inside a digital space, wishes to offer an "authentic" narrative of Mosuo cultural identity, selecting those elements of the cultural tradition regarded as the most representative to give voice to the Collective Self. In fact, an essential prerequisite for the establishment of a collective belonging is to possess a(n) (authentic) shared heritage which represents the genuineness, uniqueness and diversity of one's own culture (Bortolotto 2011, p. 14).

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qunhun jiating canyu—xuexi Engesi "jiating, siyouzhi he guojia de qiyuan"zhaji 略论解放前永宁纳西族的群婚家庭残余—学习恩格斯《家庭、私有制和国家的起源》札记 (A brief discussion about group marriage in Yongning Naxi's families — reading notes on the work "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" of F. Engels). Sixiang zhanxian, (4), pp. 32-42.

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Picture 1 was downloaded from this Web site: https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12590 (consultato il 25/03/2021).

Number of monthly active WeChat users from 2nd quarter 2011 to 1st quarter 2022(in millions)

https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/ (consultato il 20/09/2022).

The coming back of ethnonationalism in the social media era
Notes on the topicality of the concept of "imagined community"

Marco Traversari

Introduction

The subject addressed in this essay is the relation between the construction of a cultural identity and the use of social media in the development of a sense of ethnic belonging of individuals to a social group.

I referred to two starting points to understand how social media have modified the diffusion, in the infosphere, of the ideological representations typical of European contemporary nationalisms.

The first point consists of the critical renewal of some considerations included in the work *Imagined communities*, written by the historian and anthropologist Benedict Anderson at the beginning of the '80s after a long ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia.

The second point is inspired by a fieldwork I carried out in the Basque Country between 2008 and 2015, which focussed on the agency role of pro-independence organisations falling into the political spectrum of the Patriotic left, as it was historically defined.

Within these ethnicisation processes, social media had a crucial communicative function in disseminating the image of the Basque homeland among the native population. On a cultural level, research showed how digitalisation, in its social and relational dimension, has modified radically the forms of active political participation among the population, including the commitment of the activists of the nationalist organizations. In theory these ethnographic data show to what extent the replacement of traditional press-based technologies with digital technologies in communication processes

strengthened and extended the "imagined community" model, confirming empirically the views expressed by Anderson.

During the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in Bilbao I could observe the changes put into effect by the progressive spread of social media. For instance, I notice that the development of digital social networks aimed at strengthening ethnic belonging was a base element of the gradual transformation and dematerialization of the classical political mobilisation. All along the twentieth century this form of agency expressed itself in processions, assemblies, occupation of public properties, rallies, flyers and counter-information, mainly through the printed press; then, it has been progressively replaced by digital activism.

It has found expression in social media like Facebook and Telegram; while, as for documents, You Tube has taken on great importance as a repository of images from the collective memory of Basque history and of ethnonationalistic policies.

On that basis, in the first part of this essay considerable space is given to a preliminary in-depth analysis of the issue concerning the nature of ethnonationalism. It is a necessary assumption, since the term nationalism has got a very wide semantic field at a conceptual and historical level. The topics put forward by this political and philosophical view are complex and variable, although always present in the last two centuries of European history. Historically, nationalism has always been present during structural changes in western societies. Each time a technological revolution has taken place, the invention of printing in the past and the replacement of classical media with information technologies in present times, ethnonationalistic organizations, which build up and express ethnical belonging needs, have regularly taken possession of mass media.

In modern times the issue of the role played by social media in the identity construction is not confined just to the forms of transmission of messages from a medium to another one; according to some researchers in social science (Dal Lago 2017), it involves also the semantic aspect of the transmitted and received information.

In this direction, researchers themselves wonder if the ongoing digital revolution will have permanent effects on human nature. In our case, this issue could be transformed into the question "In a society controlled by algorithms and cyborgs, what meanings will the concept of ethnicity take on?" or "Is the concept of ethnonationalism going to be placed, linguistically and

philosophically, into archaeology of human sciences, in an era dominated by post humanism or, on the contrary, will it still be in evidence in the mass media?" Such questions are given a positive answer by the writer. My first point, in fact, is that it makes no sense nor has it any speculative plausibility to refer to a post human phase rooted in algorithms or in the artificial intelligence.

The definition of post human presents in itself numerous contradictions and aporias. Moreover, as in the case of the viral use of the concept of postmodern, the term post merely serves to express the occurrence of not clearly outlined situations, in which modern and human can still be found to a large extent and are still rooted in everyday experience and in what Certeau named the practice of everyday life (de Certau 2009).

On a semantic level, my opinion is that in the case of ethnonationalistic propaganda the medium did not change the semantic and value framework, on the contrary it has strengthened some elements at the hearth of the "Imagined community" model with the help of augmented reality, as we will see in the final part of the text.

However, it should be noted that the root causes of individuals' behaviour when they want to identify with an abstract entity like the concepts of Homeland or Nation, or Ethnicity, have not been modified by the effects of the diffusion of the new mass media. The roots of nationalism identified by anthropologists and historians like Ernest Gellner, Walker Connor and Anthony D. Smith are in that historically indeterminate space between nature and culture (Smith 2007, Connor 1995, Gellner 1985)

Social media act in this space, joining and manipulating drive states and networks of cultural meanings but, as the empirical research as shown so far, without generating a post human ontological form.

Benedict Anderson (1996) deviates from this discourse about the ahistorical character of the need of ethnical belonging: within the anthropological debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism, he takes his place near the latter. In fact, he chooses a constructionist approach, in which the concept of imagined communities is closely related to printing technology, similarly to the present situation, where social media are an effective communication tool for the dissemination of political ideas pertaining to the ethnonationalistic world.

Finally, it is to be noted that, remaining with the topic of imagined communities, the term "imagination" triggers language and relational games in

the virtual communities and is the basis of that dimension called metaverse by Facebook strategists.

If these are the conditions of social media development, which could be confirmed only by ethnographic research, in the future nationalism will have an outstanding technological means to implement its ideological demands and its identity politics, with unpredictable consequences.

In this essay, after a brief analysis of the concepts of ethnicity, nation and cultural identity in their historical assessment since the end of the Cold War to the Ukrainian crisis, we are going to explain how the use of social media has radically changed the forms of political expression of the social actors who are inspired by the nationalist ideology. We will take as a reference the theoretical path of B. Anderson at an interpretative level, while, as regards to the ethnographic aspect, the fieldwork carried out among the Basque independentists in San Sebastian.

The ethnographic practice will reveal some examples and consequences of the relation between cultural identity and social media.

The coming back of ethnonationalism, before mass digitalisation

The global geopolitical changes occurred since 1989 generated a revival of identity and nationalist topics which involved large sections of the western population. We must point out that this social and cultural change was neither new nor unexpected, since the issue of nationalism marked European history in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

We remind the reader that nationalist ideology is defined as a complex set of representations of the world and of public actions revolving around the concept of nation. With the term nation, in this essay, we refer to a human population baring a shared name. This population occupies a historic territory (their native land) and most of its members share a folkloric and mythological repertoire based on rituals and narratives, a public culture passed on from one generation to another generation and a common language.

After the Second World War, in the western public sphere the topics linked to the concept of nation and ethnonationalism have been declining at a historical and political level. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, bipolarism was based on governance, within the individual nation states, centred on censorship and judicial and military

repression of cultural or political claims advanced in any form by movements or ethnic parties.

This authoritarian dimension, often very strongly oriented toward repression, deployed during a long period, in which ethnonationalistic movements, in particular in Eastern Europe, were compelled to political and cultural invisibility, in order to avoid political censorship and criminalisation.

After 1989 the situation changed radically, with dramatic consequences for the European people. From a historical and political point of view, the Balkan conflict was the first effect of the visibility of ethnonationalistic claims in the political landscape.

In this respect, the siege of Sarajevo represented, not only materially, but also symbolically, the end of a bipolar world in Europe, divided between the Warsaw Pact and Nato. It was a world dominated by ideological narratives culturally unrelated and politically hostile to any form of ethnonationalism, since its political expression was considered like an ideological aggregate or in competition with State ideology.

This kind of reaction concerned not only the governments of the nations belonging to the Warsaw Pact, but also partly countries like Spain or Great Britain.

It should be noted that in Eastern Europe, despite decades of propaganda and ideological conditioning aimed to replace local demands with universalistic ideals in the name of "socialism and internationalism", the sense of ethnic belonging has not been eradicated in the indigenous communities.

In some European countries, among the new generations grown up in the Sixties and Seventies, the concepts of race, nation, ethnicity and ethnic purity continued to go about, as it used to be among their fathers and grandfathers recovering from World War I and II. Generations of young people who in the nineties were protagonists and victims of ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia. The present political scene confirms that this trend toward a need for ethnonationalistic identification is still ongoing, as demonstrated by the continuous tensions in European areas like Kosovo and in different forms in Catalonia and in the Basque Country.

These views on the end of bipolarism as a cause of the resurgence of nationalisms, though, should be integrated with other emerging elements given what is happening in these months of 2022. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine reveals two new cultural and political aspects. On the one hand, the reproposition of new geopolitical blocs which are generating a multipolar

scenario including also China and India, on the other hand the consolidation of nationalisms as no longer marginal political subjects. In Ukraine, in fact, different forms of nationalism exist while on the other side, Russian foreign politics is largely shaped by this kind of ideological demands.

Coming back to the historical background of the dissolution of the two blocs before February 2022, we need to add to the numerous causes for the reoccurrence of ethnic conflicts in Europe the acceleration of the processes of economic and technological globalization, which had as one of its numerous consequences the phenomenon of mass migration.

A global movement of millions of people from those geographical and political regions which came into being after the phase of decolonisation of the sixties and seventies and were affected by the economic and climate crisis at the end of the twentieth century. A migration in some cases towards, this is worth mentioning, territories already suffering from strong identity conflicts between the indigenous populations. Finally among the factors underlying the coming back of nationalism, the digital revolution was a powerful means of dissemination of identity politics and it also enabled the creation of a global village which in real time produces virtual communities inspired by alleged ethnic differences.

Dissolution of the two blocs, economic globalisation, mass migrations and digital revolution are, thus, the main factors underpinning the ideological reproposition of cultural traditions and communities invented and imagined.

The end of the twentieth century showed in Europa some dynamics of ethnogenesis which generated nationalisms swinging between "nineteenth-century" ideological models and identity claims built on ethnic elements like religion, language and tradition.

Within this scenario, some forms of ethnicisation of the population developed, based on inclusion and exclusion dynamics: various ethnographic analyses pointed out the emergence of social and cultural phenomena, in which racism and structural violence are embedded. This contributed substantially to the construction of cultural categories like those of foreigner and refugee. It is talk of performative concepts because they induced, in particular in general media, the perception of the other as a foreign presence, hostile to the natives' customs and cultural and religious habits.

In this sense, as for the role of mass media and the construction of the foreigner as an enemy, the production of public images of migrants as a

destabilising factor for the traditional institutional structures is particularly important. Let's think, for instance, to the viral character, above all in social media, of the news which put the blame on a young Ukraine refugee, placed in a British family during the Russia-Ukraine war, for the break of the couple and the rapid dissolution of parental or affection ties.

In addition to such reasons and social phenomena, in the late nineties a new political element emerged, which represents a powerful ideological root of current nationalisms and identity movements. It is the conceptual, political and legal framework of sovranism. This political view claims the absolute decision-making power by the political authorities of a State, within a territory defined by legal boundaries and inhabited by people who identify themselves in the concept of Nation.

Therefore, sovranism becomes the new action backdrop of ethnonationalism, while the staging of its ideological framework mainly occurs in the world of communications of social networks and general media. It should be noted that the main forms of expression of sovranism and of populism are not the classical channels for the transmission of political messages, i.e. demonstrations or printed materials, it's rather mass mobilisation by means of digitalisation; in particular, Facebook and Instagram platforms and Telegram channels in the last five years. The use of networks in political communication not only has changed the mobilisation forms, as we pointed out at the beginning of this essay, it also generated new political subjects (Dal Lago 2017). Just think of the emergency of virtual parties like the Five Star Movement in Italy, or the gradual formation of a political area which intersects the sovranist perspectives and is defined as digital populism. As numerous ethnographies about identity movements in the field of political anthropology demonstrate, the success of populist parties does not derive mainly from abstract legal considerations on the national sovereignty issue, but rather from a complex management of deep impulses which involve the need for belonging of individuals scared by an atomisation of the cultural meanings in which they built their social and cultural identity.

Imagined communities

In this essay I wish to propose the theory of the imagined communities developed by the anthropologist and historian Benedict Anderson (1996) as

a theoretical and interpretative system referred to new ethnonationalisms. Anderson identified as an essential social factor for the spread of nationalism the rise and development of mass media and in particular the invention of print technology and the products linked to it, newspapers, books and flyers: all materials required to build that kind of "imagined" community underlying the mythopoeic processes which found and enliven the ideology of nation or ethnicity.

It's worth mentioning the reasons why Anderson developed the concept of "Imagined community" within the theory aimed at interpreting his ethnographic study carried out in the Far East, in particular in Indonesia.

Anderson starts from the assumption that the existence of a large political community which goes beyond the geographical area of a district or a village cannot be founded on the individual perception to belong to the same political group just by means of personal interaction.

Those individuals who claim to share a cultural identity with other members of the population are compelled to carry out identification processes rooted in a cultural imagery shared and socialised thanks to the mass media. Nationalism is not generated by proximity ties, not by institutional mechanisms; it is rather founded on a sense of belonging to an imagined community which goes beyond a district or a small settlement.

It is a collective imagery shared by a multiplicity of individuals; it takes the form of a steady production of symbols and narratives which generates emotional states and ties among individuals.

Aware of this dynamic, political and cultural ethnonationalist organizations implement ethnicisation processes which necessarily imply in the involved subjects a sense of belonging to an abstract community, imagined thanks to the usage of mass communications.

Community is perceived as one's own homeland and it is always founded on foundation myths, made up of narratives that are also the key elements of that set of discourses and ritual symbolic practices underlying invented traditions.

It should be noted that Anderson developed the concept of imagined community exactly during his ethnographic research in the Far East, when those *nation building* processes where taking place which over the twentieth century radically changed form and balances of the geopolitical world atlas and triggered violent interethnic conflicts on the Asian continent in the end of the seventies.

Our fieldwork demonstrated that religious rituals and forms of knowledge persisted besides the modern cultural representations; this way the forecasts of those who imagined a more and more rationalized and secularised world were refuted.

After the military defeat of French colonialism at first and then of US imperialism, some conflicts broke out triggered by nationalist movements, as in the case of war between Cambodia and Vietnam and between China and Vietnam. Anderson was impressed by the fact that those three nations had all experienced a Marxist revolution and they based their economy on a socialist organisation. Those conditions were actually alien to the Marxist tradition, which criticises any kind of nationalism and is open to ideological demands always pursuing internationalism. Starting from this contradictory situation, Anderson began to develop a research on the causes of nationalism. This phenomenon cannot be reduced to economical structural dynamics or to superstructural ones; therefore, it requires other theoretical interpretative schemes as an alternative to the conceptual reductionism of Marxist anthropology.

Consequently, Anderson considers nations as cultural artefacts, changing along with the environment that generated them, but never disappearing in the course of history. The origins of these cultural artefacts date back to the end of the eighteenth century.

Nationalism is also placed on the level of symbolic and significant dispositives, besides political ideologies and religions, since one of the functions of nationalism is to answer some of the deepest human questions, for instance those concerning the sense of life and the mortality of human beings; according to Anderson, some of the deepest psychological needs of man about precariousness of existence are expressed in nationalism, because they are lessened through faith in the nation.

Dying for one's own homeland is the same as dying for one of the gods of modernity: with this theory the author highlights the relationship between political dimension and existential sphere in an individual and he shows that the ethnonationalist ideologies may become forms of religion.

There is a meeting point between nationalism, which is always based on an imagined narrative, and mass communication tools, which respond to a subject's desire and need of identification. In contemporary life these mass communication tools are the social digital networks. They are virtual places where parts of the nationalist discourses grow; they spread infor-

mation and mythopoeic meanings in which any possible imagined communities strike root.

Before understanding how we can apply the concept of "imagined community" in relation to social media, we should identify the main anthropological orientations about cultural identity which characterized the social science scenario in the second half of the twentieth century.

Anthropological theories about nationalism

As we have seen, the relationship between nationalism and ethnicisation processes became clear in the last three decades of the twentieth century, as a consequence of the end of a world that was politically and economically organised in two blocks. However, if we shift our anthropological focus from the global dynamics to the local ones, then we realize that globalisation had an enormous weight in the nationalist reactions of some social groups, but also in the development of populist movements stimulated by sovereignistic ideology (Galli 2019).

In the field of social science, until the seventies the main theoretical paradigms (Segre 2014) had focussed on society modernisation processes. This focus followed in the footsteps of Max Weber's and Émile Durkheim's thinking and of the theorists of conflict, influenced by Marx's and Simmel's great sociological traditions, and then developed their heritage (Collins 1996). For these sociologists modernisation implied the cancellation of any kind of magical or religious thinking, so that after the Second World War research was more and more oriented toward a desacralisation of the world through a reproposition of Weber's disenchantment theories, which was an error, as empirical reality subsequently proved.

The new political and institutional settings in Asia and Africa drove Anderson, in parallel with large sectors of social sciences, to confront radically different cultural worlds compared to the past, which required a review of the conceptual tools used to cope with the dynamics and the sociocultural structures of modernity. Let's think, for instance, of reductionism implied in the concept of di modernity which, as science anthropologist B. Latour pointed out, had been applied for decades as a hermeneutical tool to a multitude of heterogeneous empirical realities in the field of political philosophy and functionalist sociology. On the contrary, the ethnographic

research of some anthropologists, for instance J. Clifford's studies, revealed that this category could not explain numerous phenomena concerning the production of cultural networks (Latour 2009). In the study of the ethnogenetic mechanisms of cultural identity, this reductionism subsumed the persistence of identity structures to the structuralist or economicist interpretation linked to the analysis of production relations. For instance, the sense of belonging to a community through the identification of individuals with certain ethnic features, such as the folkloric tradition or the language used in daily life, was simplified and considered as a reaction, almost a behavioural one, to the processes of economical rationalisation. Contemporary ethnographic research shows us, on the contrary, that some forms of ethnonationalism which arise in the most advanced metropolitan areas are not so different from other forms in less industrialized areas. Phenomena of secessionism in regions like Lombardy or in Catalonia are an example. Benedict Anderson's considerations Benedict Anderson had to face a wide range of anthropological theories focussed on the study of nationalism. In this essay we are going to examine those theoretical references which our author approached.

Among the numerous theoretical perspectives which examined the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity in order to understand the phenomenon of ethnonationalism (Scarduelli 2000), the analysis conducted by the US political scientist Walter Connor seem to be particularly fruitful (Connor 1994); the description of the ethnical origin of nations by Anthony D. Smith (Smith 1992); the relation between modernity and nationalism in Ernst Gellner (Gellner 1985).

Both Gellner and Anderson can be considered modernists, as they define ethnicity as a social construction generated by complex interactions among social actors and set the origin of nationalist ideologies in modern and contemporary times. The central role that Anderson attributes to mass media in the construction of the sense of belonging to an imagined community derives exactly from the demonstration that the press played a central role in the dissemination of nationalist ideas. It was the same role that social media play today. According to Anderson circularity exists between the concepts of nation-media-imagined community and such a triad has been possible only in modern times, therefore it is not appropriate to use the term nationalism before the scientific revolution.

According to Gellner and Anderson, the concept of ethnicity is secondary to the concept of nationalism. As for the empiric analysis, the ongoing war in Ukraine is a confirmation of what the two authors stated, since the geopolitical analysis and the ethnographic research reveal that nationalism does exist, in particular in the Ukrainian area, which is not linked to the concept of ethnicity. A component of Ukrainian nationalism is fully covered by Gellner's analysis. In the context of the analysis on nationalism, Gellner's view reflects that of Benedict Anderson in some theoretical aspects, two of which are particularly significant. The first is the rejection of an essentialist perspective with respect to the genesis of the ethnic group. Nation, nationalism and models of representation of the social community in terms of ethnic group are all expressions of modernity. In the opinion of these two authors, ethnicity is not an ahistorical and universal entity, rather a concept linked to historical and political contexts in which some social groups use this concept to reach certain goals.

Anderson (1996) explains the origin of the concept of nationalism through the basic role of mass education, which will be implemented through schooling starting from the twentieth century.

If we compare the two authors, in my opinion Anderson's theoretical scenario is less strict, therefore easier to be used as a cultural analysis tool in the ethnographic context I worked in. We will deal with this topic in depth later.

A radically different view is in the study on ethnonationalism carried out by the political scientist Walter Connor (1994). In the seventies, against the mainstream in social sciences, Connor was among the first scholars who focused on the issue of ethnonationalisms. He pointed out in several occasions that no "revival" of nationalism was taking place. On the contrary, the topic of nation and nationalism, as well as the issue of ethnicity, would never leave the socio-economical western scenario.

The analysis of ethnonationalisms in Connor, in the first phase of his study, starts from a radical criticism against the prevailing politological theories in the United States and in Great Britain, which transformed the paradigm of modernisation, applied to the formation of the new States, in the theory of the "construction of the nation". This perspective, in which also analysis like Huntington's theory on the clash of civilisations (Huntington 1990) will be worked out later, stated that western values rooted in the idea of State emerged during the Enlightenment era would spread also to nations

undergoing decolonisation processes. On the contrary, Connor demonstrated that exactly "technological development", a factor supposed to spread the classical European State model, was causing the opposite effects.

In contrast to the position upheld in the politological theory of "creation of the nation" (Scarduelli 2000), identity claims were reviving and social groups tended to differentiate not only according to economic conditions in compliance with the class and rank social structure, but also according to ethnic criteria. Mass media played a key role in this process: as we will see by analysing Anderson's thought, they will make a big difference in the construction of the "imagined community".

As communication media allowed an increasing amount of contacts between groups and individuals, they would not cause ibridation phenomena, but rather opposition and conflict among ethnic communities.

The sense of the nation is a psychological link between people and an entity which transcends the individual, like the State or the ethnic community; this connection has got unconscious values and generates the belief to be related to some individuals and to be different from others who belong to a different nation. The concept of belief has a special significance in Connor's thought, together with the related psychological dimension. It is a psychological link analogous to the one defined as "sense of belonging" in the field of social psychology. It springs from the need for affiliation and takes the form of actions and feelings of sharing the same preferences and values with others. This feeling of belonging, which can be expressed in terms of "mechanical solidarity", remains constant and casts on the nation a degree of stability and indissolubility over time. In this respect, Connor's theory can be incorporated in those ideas of nation and nationalism which A. D. Smith defines as perennial (Smith 2007, p.122).

A.D. Smith tried to synthesise the two themes. He considers nations as a product of complex and structured historical processes, whereas their origins rooted in an ethnical dimension. In his study on the origin of nations, he identifies the symbolic dispositive which ethnically founds the nation in the concept of mythomoteur.

According to Smith, a nation does not base its existence on psychological reasons, like the need for belonging to a community. The British scholar takes the view that a nation is founded on symbolic structures which are not subjective, are durable and are not restricted by personal psychological trends.

These symbolic structures underlying the nations always take the cultural form of myths and narratives. For its continued existence over time a nation needs tales and stories to be kept in national literature or in ethnical memories, which mainly express in the "founding myth".

A.D. Smith identifies a group of six essential elements to establish a community which perceives itself as such and is founded on an ethnic unity.

These six elements which found ethnicity are: a collective name; a myth about a common lineage; a shared history taking on the form of ethnic memory; a distinctive culture shared by the members of the group; the connection to a specific territory and, finally, a strong sense of solidarity and of belonging to community.

In this perspective, nationalism creates the idea of nation through numerous processes of cultural invention, ranging from founding mythologies to the manipulative relation with folklore (Hobsbawm, Ranger, 1983).

Anderson on a… pre-digital field

As for my study focussed on anthropology of ethnonationalism in the Basque Country, Anderson's text helped me in the preliminary phase, under two aspects. First, I practically placed the object of my research into the historical dimension of nationalisms in the twentieth century; secondly, it helped me to focus the key points of the concept of imagined community, in particular the role of censuses, of maps and of museums in the construction of the network of cultural meanings underlying every contemporary ethnonationalism.

In my research, the Gernika Museum in the Basque Country was a significant ethnographic place to understand the dynamics of ethnonationalism before the large diffusion of digital media.

Inventing two museums to build an imagined community

As Hobsbawm wrote:

> "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past: In fact, where possible, they

> normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. […]The historic past into which the new tradition is inserted need not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mists of time. (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983, p. 48.)

There are two symbolically very important places, possible examples of an "invention of tradition" generating the dimension of the imagined Basque community: the museum Ziortza-Bolibar dedicated to Simón Bolivár and the museum area of Gernika, which grew around the Peace Museum founded at the end of Franco dictatorship thanks to foreign financing.

Gernika, martyr city and symbol of the independent movement. Death as a founding myth of the imagined community

The Gernika Peace Museum is forty kilometres from Ziortza-Bolibar.

Much broader than the structure dedicated to Simón Bolivár, this museum is located in the centre of the small town, surrounded by a large park which is part of the largest protected natural area of the Basque Country. It consists of three floors, on the first one there are the Head office, a library with the most important works published on the bombing of the town in the last ten years, as well as a large exhibition area that every six months hosts figurative arts exhibitions dedicated to struggles for independence or social struggles in various parts of the world, on the model of the Catalan cultural centre in Barcelona. During my research two exhibitions were held, the first one dedicated to torture in Honduras in the eighties, the second to father Pedro Arupe and his awareness-raising initiatives within the Catholic Church towards the poorest areas in the world. A common element in the two exhibitions was the worldwide commitment of the Society of Jesus and, in the case of Honduras, the commemoration of the Jesuites who died to defend some farmers' trade unions fighting against land expropriation.

On the second floor, the bombing of Gernika is reconstructed through photos and video images of that time. An installation is particularly interesting: it consists in a room furnished like a Basque home at the time, where the material effects of bombing are reproduced through sounds and ceiling vibrations. Out of that room, a staircase leads to the third floor, with images and relics of the Francoist era, some dedicated to a system of torture and execution called garrota.

After the section dedicated to the repression in the Basque Provinces under Franco, visitors enter a well lit up space with the images of ETA militants who died during military actions and were killed by Guardia Civil; among them, one of the founders of the organisation, Joan Extebarria. These images are close to the ones of leaders of the anti-segregationist movement in South Africa. It's worth noting the proximity of the photography of Txomin, one of ETA historical leaders, to that of the leader of South African Communist Party, Steve Bikowho also died after being tortured by the police.

Some exhibition panels, written in English, French, Spanish and Euskara, explain the reason why the photos were displayed in this particular way. According to the compilers and the editors of this exhibition, the similarity, hence the juxtaposition, of these various protagonists should be searched in the common fight for freedom against those States which want to cancel cultural differences through ethnic genocide. The last caption reveals, after listing the number of victims of the conflict between ETA ethnonationalists and the Spanish government, that bilateral agreements between the conflicting parties are needed to stop "cultural genocide".

Ethnic memory is the historical and cognitive dimension which allows the existence and persistence of ethnicity. Production mechanisms of the ethnic memory involve what Hobsbawm and Ranger named "the invention of tradition". Gernika museum, which was opened in 1997 and also commissioned and financed by municipal governments in which Izquierda abertzale holds the political majority supported by the Basque Nationalist Party, seems to be a tool for the construction of ethnic habitus. In the Gernika Peace Museum this educational function is already expressed in the first room of the second floor, where scale models of the main Basque cultural institutions are displayed, while the audio-visual reproduction of the bombing is located in the following room.

Another function of the museum, an emerging trend also in similar structures built in Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall (Macdonald, 2006), is to build the narrative foundations of the new nation, which came into being after political secession processes. In the case of Gernika museum our aim is to explain the legitimacy of the nationalist claims, based on the repression suffered in the past by the Spanish State, and to show the population the narrative of the founding myth underlying the new political institution. In this case the founding myth is Gernika, a symbol of Basque autonomy, at the time of fueros the place where the kings swore an oath of loyalty to the

autonomy of Bizkaia and later on a "martyr city" precisely because it is the hearth of Basque autonomy.

Designers and curators of the museum wanted to fully comply with ethnonationalists' narrative, and transformed the museum in a production mechanism of ethnic habitus.

Ethnonationalism 2.0

The ethnographic site considered in the previous paragraph was founded before the development of social media, therefore is connected to the dissemination of the nationalist ideology through traditional modes, limited to the diffusion of the press.

To the Basque imagined community they represent places to "visit", as well as the destination of a political pilgrimage: people moving in a space, who must go to the sites of martyrdom at least once in their life. It was a lay martyrdom, caused by bombings by Italian and German aircrafts on the town symbol of Basque autonomy since the time of fueros. Digitalisation has changed, although not radically, the relationship with these sites. Nowadays the websites of the two museums are networked and they explain the contents offered to visitors trying to get people to come from any part of the world. Basque ethnonationalism is always presented as a universal cause concerning all humanity, therefore Gernika museum bear witness of a wound to mankind as a whole. This theory is strengthened also in contemporary art thanks to the Picasso's famous picture, which provides a background for most opening pages on the websites of Basque nationalist organisations.

In this case, however, digitalisation is an ancillary tool in the construction of the imagined community. This is made up by the physical displacement from one's home to the museum and afterwards in the narrative, through photos and videos for those who stayed at home and nevertheless feel part of this community.

A second level of digitalisation which was an object of my ethnographic study is the network as a public memory storage place, in particular the search engine and website YouTube. This device had a basic role in the extension of the imagined Basque community, as it involved millions of users. This site contains a lot of images and videos; when I finished my study, in

2015 there were more than 1500 clips, almost all posted by common users, not necessarily Basque, and by nationalist organizations. Those videos can be classified within the following topics: Basque history for novices, construction and biography of Basque heroes, including ETA militants, who are actually the majority, Basque mythology founding the homeland, Euskara language courses, reports of processes, and speeches by independentist political leaders belonging to the nationalist left wing. In particular, Arnaldo Otegi was a hero not only in the struggles of the last thirty years, but also on the media. There are hundreds of videos dedicated to him and they provide a reference point for the Basque community, in particular for the Basque migrants in the USA and in South America, in order to understand every political and cultural oscillation relevant to the ethnic universe they belong to.

These are the two levels we could call ethnonationalism 1.0. It is a passive participation, not different from the use made of press and television. Websites have to be consulted in order to get information. The construction of virtual communities and the widespread expansion of social networks in the whole Basque society represented a further step into digital ethnonationalism.

We can call this further social and technological passage ethnonationalism 2.0. In this phase interaction is not unidirectional any more, as it used to be in the previous level, it is symmetrical and bidimensional. We are in the social media dimension, where in the case of the Basque country the platform Facebook/Meta played a central role so far.

The use of social media in the political community of Basque independentists began in the late eighties through the experimentation of the first counter-information networks, which anticipated at a technological level the Internet network connected to the telephone system. This telecommunication system was named ECN and was used by few people. In 1992 the members of ECN network were not more than 800. The surge in numbers has taken place since 1995, when the connection network of Web technological system extended in the Basque Country. At that point ECN network was abandoned by the independentists and replaced by the new communication system, in particular by private and public chats. By means of these last technological innovations virtual communities emerge, which are both the beginning and the turning point in the organisational forms of activism and of ethnonationalists belonging to the political area defined as patriotic

left (Izquierda abertzale) in the Basque Country. From 2005 onwards public meetings, demonstrations and gatherings, both permitted and prohibited by the police or the Guardia Civil, decreased sharply. Likewise, the number of community centres or public meeting places declined in the following years. Networks and virtual communities will gradually replace the scenes which characterized political activism, in particular independentist activism, in the second half of the twentieth century.

The analysis of ethnonationalist sites does not reveal a change of the contents underlying this political view. The base theories and the protagonists of Basque struggles and stories are still the same. The newspaper Gara, direct expression of the Basque nationalist left, moved from the paper version, which only a very small number of people buy now, i.e. those born in the fifties, to the digital version with an own Website and an account in all social media. There are tens of thousands contacts every day and also the subscriptions to the digital version of the newspaper are 700% higher than the paper version. The contents of the texts have not changed; they are divided in Castillan and Euskara language as they were before. However, digitalisation has radically changed a basic factor for every kind of political and social activism, interactive audience involved by nationalist messages, i.e. the possibility to expand the quantitative dimension of the imagined community.

The most interesting ethnographic case, which let us understand to what extent social media have influenced agency and political mobilisation forms of ethnonationalist organizations, is the evolution of an independentist community centre that ended its activity moving from physical reality virtual reality and carrying on its political activity toward the construction of Basque cultural identity as an intergenerational bridge between younger and older militants.

Okendo community centre, located at the hearth of San Sebastian, has been a place for political and cultural aggregation of independentist organisations for more than thirty years. In that place assemblies, demonstrations and fundraising events were arranged to guarantee legal assistance to political detainees. In 1986 a computer room was opened, where frequent visitors of the centre could use the terminals connected to ECN network. An internet room was opened in 1997 and the first group chats started. From that moment on, the physical stations for using the network have occupied an entire floor. Since 2010 the number of station users fell considerably, as well as the number of meetings and assemblies, till their frequency was adjusted

to annual or half annual. All activities that used to take place in presence moved to the infospace starting from 2015 and the physical community was replaced by a virtual community, where every day in real time the imagined Basque community is reproduced. An objection was raised against the reasons for the emptying of the centre is the progressive dissolution of activism and of ethnonationalist ideology, in particular after the disbandment of ETA and of Batasuna party, the two militant and political hegemonic groups in the area of the Basque independent movement. The ethnographic analysis of the sites, even though it does not cover the political dynamics of the groups which occupied Okendo, reveals a wide and intense participation in the network in terms of daily contacts with ethnonationalist sites. In addition, new web sites and pages about these topics are continuously being launched. These ethnographic data show that also the new generation of digital natives takes part in political activism, contrary to the theory of the vanishing of nationalist ideology. Social media widened cultural identity topics, which now involve an increasing number of users and also discussions on Basque ethnicity features became more complex. In this sense, suffice it to mention the continuous growth of Euskara language courses in the network at any learning level. Moreover, the migration of ethnicisation practices from physical to virtual involved also Basque citizens, descending from previous generations who left Spain and France after the Civil War and had cut any roots with their homeland. Nowadays social media, and more generally digitalisation, made it possible to re-establish a relation to tradition in the space of the Imagined Community, with all limits described in the above paragraph concerning the invention of this historical dimension.

Imagined communities at the time of identity resurgence and algorithms

The concept of imagined community is at the core of Anderson's whole theoretical system. We have seen that it is defined as a set o f social relations supported by mass media technologies, which create imaginative and pulsional elements. This mechanism of social reproduction and representation production is possible because the member of the group, who recognize themselves in a shared idea of nation, share the same values. Cultural representations and value axes make up a collective imagery composed of my-

thologies son the origins of one's own ethnicity and narratives on substance or on the processes founding one's own cultural identity. This network of meanings requires constant reproduction in order to exist and not to dissolve in the flows of information and time. Otherwise it risks losing its ability to have an emotional impact as for the link among the members of the ethnic group. The limit of mass media, in particular of the press, was exactly the temporary break of the information flux, therefore the weakening of the sense of belonging with a nationalist tendency. Moreover, those media were cold, not interactive, therefore the relationship was asymmetrical.

Contrary to the mass communication system of the press, digitalisation of information allows a continuous production of meanings and consequent emotional states, which fuel a permanent national awareness. In social media there is a continuous feedback between sender and receiver, whereby an immediate and steady monitoring of the relation is guaranteed.

To this communication process you must add the possibility for the social actors receiving information to act actively on the processes of creation and production of meanings. If, for instance, an Irish nationalist publishes a post about the use of a Gaelic verb in a sentence, other users can immediately send their answers on the declinations of that term. A very long discussion can start and help building a nationalist frame of belonging.

Thanks to the media, the sense of belonging to an ethnic group becomes thus a part of the infosphere, where the cultural identity of the social actor is generated in real time.

We understood that ethnographic work focused on the construction of the cultural identity of an ethnic group cannot ignore the technological and social dimension of the digitalisation processes. Imagined communities are an expression of the web and they depend less and less on the press or on the general television system. More specifically, they are generated thanks to the social media, therefore it is necessary to apply the classical structures of ethnonationalism within the analysis of social media. We have already entered the phase of ethnonationalism 2.0.

Following to this analysis, supported by some ethnographical examples, we would like to finish with a reference to contemporary reality, being aware of the decreasing political relevance of issues concerning historical European nationalisms, whereas identity and sovereignty movements are emerging, that will increasingly take the form of digital populism. This kind of populism is entirely dominated, at a communication and partly at a de-

cision-making level, by people and political groups using social media as communication tools.

If we focus on the situation in Italy, it is interesting to note that the intensive daily use of digital technologies in the pandemic period has generated in the last two years a wide network of social relations with a political nature, which can be inscribed in the sphere of virtual communities.

In the framework of the Italian identity movements, criticism against healthcare policies in the pandemic period led to the rise of new political aggregations. These social actors, in particular those politically close to the radical right wing, at the beginning del 2022, with an incumbent Russian-Ukrainian conflict, developed a multitude of agency practices aimed at the construction of imagined communities, not only virtual, based on the ideology of Euroasiatism.

Social networks brought about the expansion of this complex set of representations and productions of ethnic and identity imageries. From an ethnographic perspective, it is noteworthy the set-up of Facebook sites and pages in the network, at the beginning of the first pandemic phase, by activists of the radical right wing, whose ideology refers to the thought of the Russian philosopher A. Dugin. Those sites migrated toward the Italian Eurasiatist community. COVID 19 emergency was in fact the focus of intense debate in this political camp since, according to the administrators of the web sites and pages, it was the expression of a progressive acceleration of economic globalisation mechanisms and of the attempt of western capitalism to expand the neoliberal philosophy through a kind of healthcare dictatorship.

During pandemic the ethnographic research I'm carrying out as a prosecution of my study on identitarism resulted in the identification of new accounts for the purpose of discussing and of counter-information. In particular, in order to react to emergency situation between 2020 and 2021 a Facebook page was launched with the name Economy of the Spirit; it has got a lot of followers and it is updated on a daily basis. The aim of this initiative was not only to create a network for mutual assistance using one's own skills, rather to start a narrative focussed on identity claims in terms of consent and compliance with Euroasiatist political projects. This political orientation is defined with the word red-brunism at a general mediatic level.

The site and the Facebook page "Economia di Spirito" revealed their identity character at the beginning of 2022, when the conflict in Ukraine broke

out: debate, network of relations, information exchanges and the immediate possibility, offered by social media, to identify with an abstract and imagined entity showed in real time the rise of an imagined community.

Users who discussed about virus and vaccines during pandemic agreed unanimously in defending the policies of the Russian government, as they expressed a political project that referred to a geopolitical multipolarity in which the Euroasiatic political and geographical entity should play an important role

Social media had a major role in the whole process, since they are an immediate tool which generates cultural identity and political belonging in a time dimension that was unimaginable when the media were based on the press and the television system.

In our opinion, we should start precisely from this example of relation between social media and construction of a community, not only a virtual one, in order to develop an ethnographic practice within B. Anderson's theoretical work, which continues to be a basic hermeneutical tool to understand and interpret the new forms of ethnonationalism. Furthermore, it should be stressed that studying social media is fundamental not only to understand the development of ethnonationalism, but also to explain the new forms of political aggregation that emerged in the last ten years. It is, in particular, noteworthy the importance of interactivity, a peculiar feature of these communication systems, which entered recent discussions about the management of pandemic emergency and of the ongoing war on Ukrainian soil.

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Notes

Digital countryside. New ruralities, smart agricultures and innovation processes

1   TraPP (transhumance and pastoralism as elements of the intangible heritage)
2   Municipalities, Local Groups of Action (GAL) and European Economic Interest Grouping (GEIE).
3   Internet source: www.reterurale.it (Consulted on 18/09/2022).
4   Internet source: http://www.rural4learning.eu/ (Consulted on 18/09/2022).
5   E.A.R.T.H. (Education Agriculture Resources for Territories and Heritage) is an Erasmus + Capacity Building project, funded by EACEA and coordinated by Università degli Studi del Molise, in which 9 European and Latin-American Universities (Italy, Spain, France, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay) and 3 international ONGs take part. It focussed on university education for sustainable development related to safeguard and promotion of agricultural and pastoral knowledge and practices rooted in the territories, in the sense of biocultural resource and as a heritage element contributing to the added value of activities and products resulting from work and lifestyle of farmers and shepherds. Started in 2018 and funded for about one million Euros, EARTH organised 6 Online Workshops to prepare and select students for the didactic experimentation, which was initially expected in presence and afterwards was online because of COVID. Between November 2020 and April 2021, six Online International Courses (OIC) were carried out on various topics concerning the project, each of them coordinated by one of the member Countries of the consortium. The teachers of all universities and NGO taking part in the project contributed to the courses and the students of all involved universities took part in the lessons. Among them OIC 6, coordinated by Paraguay, examined in greater depth topics about the application of ICT to rural contexts; it was monitored and coordinated by myself, Angelo Belliggiano for Università degli Studi del Molise, Oscar Bazoberry for Universidad Mayor de San Andrès and Jean Paul Benavides for Universidad Catòlica Boliviana.
5   Interview on 14/4/2021.
6   In recent years we have faced a real multitude of Support programmes concerning rural development and regeneration of fragile and depopulate areas, especially in the countryside and in the mountains: PNRR – Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, PSRN – Piano di Sviluppo Rurale Nazionale, FSE – Fondo Sociale Europeo, FESR – Fondo Europeo di Sviluppo Regionale, SNAI, - Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne.
7   The guidelines for the development of Precision Farming in Italy were formalised with DM 33671 of 22/12/17, in particular targeting public financing toward incentives for semi-automatic steering of tractors and agricultural machinery by means of GPS and the so called 'variable dosage' (of water, fertilizers, plant protection products, fuel, etc.).

8   Lionetti Paola (edited by), *Rural Learn. Formation Online, R e t e Rurale Nazionale*, internet source: https://www.reterurale.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/19351

9   *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/shaping-europe-digital-future_en).

10   Interview by Letizia Bindi to Giuseppe Savino on 8/04/21.

11   From the presentation of *Vazàpp* Facebook profile: @vazapp

12   Interview on 16th, September 2019, www.corrieredellasera.it .

13   Note about the municipal doctorate exactly on those aspects in Fortore

14   IYRP. Source Internet: http://iyrp.info

15   In this case, as in the following one – as for the company OltreBIO –a fieldwork was carried out, inspections, interviews, observation of materials and digital spaces were prepared by the various companies, repeated talks over time, observation of the interactions between young entrepreneurs and customers took place, aiming at understanding to which extent the major intervention of the digital platforms and of the new media had influenced and was then transforming the relation between producer and consumer in the context of a relatively peripheral region with respect to the big circuits of the national and international market of organic products. The work with these two companies is going on also in the context of other design and research activities, for instance the preparation of a call for tenders for Green Communities and other project frameworks of the Research Centre BIOCULT.

16   Promoción de Redes Agroalimentarias Gastronòmicas Inclusivas.

17   They are Andean areas at 3500 m above sea level.

18   TraPP project – Trashumancia y pastoralismo como elementos del patrimonio inmaterial, financed by CUIA-CONICET, 2019-2021.

19   SNAI means Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne, a process aiming at contrasting depopulation and abandonment, restoring and promoting Italian inland areas through actions designed to the economic, demographic, cultural and social regeneration. Source Internet http://https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/. More recently, the study "Giovani Dentro" [Young at heart] returned to this topics. It was also conducted in the framework of the National strategy for inner areas [Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne], carried out by Giulia Sonzogno.

20   PIANO NAZIONALE DI RIPRESA E RESILIENZA – government. Internet source: ht- tps://www.governo.it/governo.it/files/PNRR e http://next-generation.eu

Beninese Vodun *in the Network: Between Social Media and Marketability*

1   Unicameral Parliament of Benin.

2   The French term "féticheur" is locally used to refer generically to both *vodun* priests (*houno* or *vodunon*) and *bokono* (those who practice geomancy), but sometimes also to those who simply own and operate with *vodun*. Although the term was widely used by Christian missionaries – and not only by them – in a derogatory sense, has now lost its negative connotation and is used by the practitioners themselves to denote their ability to manipulate the forces of

the invisible. For more on the ambiguity of meaning and use of this term, see Brivio (2012, pp. 41-49). In this text I preferred to use the term "*vodun* practitioners" to refer to all people acting in this universe and have developed practices and knowledge around *vodun*.

3   The *vodun* bearer is the person who, during a public ceremony, physically carries the *vodun* out of the temple, shouldering it and dancing to the rhythm of the *tam-tams*

4   Located in the Atingbansa quartiers of Porto-Novo.

5   The subject of *vodun* ceremonies assumes an active role rather than merely being a spectator. The various ritual gestures performed by the individual vary from ceremony to ceremony, depending on the requests and instructions of the priest. Normally, the participant is rubbed with a sacrificial animal (typically a chicken) so that it absorbs the negative forces, or they are asked to bite pieces of kola nut after receiving the oracle's response. In this sense, the smartphone, replacing the interested follower, is not merely a tool but defines the experience of the transcendent itself; see Meyer (2008), Morgan (2005).

6   For a review of the literature regarding the "material turn" in religious studies, see Hazard (2013) and Bräunlein (2016).

7   For methodological perspectives on the "netnographic" approach, see Kozinets (2010), Bartl et al. (2016).

8   After some ethical and deontological considerations, I decided to retain the names of the subjects considered. This decision is primarily based on the fact that these profiles are public, available online and not the result of interviews or other forms of observations filtered through the writer's interpretive process; secondly, I consider this an interesting opportunity to allow each reader to trace both the sources discussed here and their future transformations, should these profiles continue to be active in the following months and years.

9   Variant of *fon-gbe* language. This is the language most widely spoken among the *goun* population of Porto-Novo.

10 His personal Facebook profile, named "Togbe Adjos", overlaps with the page "Vodun Temple de Togbé Gankpangnan" that he probably manages, and the group "Espaces Vodun Jazz Village. Ouidah, Benin, West Africa.

11 A term used to refer to various curative products, made from herbs or other mostly plant-based substances, whose composition remains exclusive knowledge of their preparers.

12 Such as the CNCVB "Commonauté Nationale du Culte Vodun du Bénin," see also Brivio (2012, p. 247).

13 Dossier "Etat de mise en oeuvre du PAG 2016-2021" available on the official government website (https://www.gouv.bj).

14 Following the great success of the first "Festival international des arts et cultures *vodun*", known as *Ouidah'92* (8-18 February 1993).

15 On how phenomena of mediatisation and politicisation offer legitimisation strategies to certain ceremonies, see Gardini (2014).

16 This distinction between the realm of worship and that of culture deserves further exploration. The existence of two separate levels "cultic" and "cultural" is present in many official speeches and is constantly reiterated during major public festivities such as the *10th of January* in Ouidah or the *15th of August* in Savalou (The Yam Festival).

17 For more on the title of Gogan, see among others: Cafuri (1995, pp. 350-356).

18 Recorded conversation with Silvestre Gogan, 29th August 2019, Porto-Novo.

Locked rooms and "digital contact zone". Pandemic, interruption of everyday reality and construction of a new museum identity: the experience of the Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia in Turin (MAET).

1   The first paragraph was drawn up and edited by Erika Grasso, the second paragraph by Gianluigi Mangiapane and the third one by Margherita Valentini. The conclusions are the result of shared considerations by the authors.

2   Collection of Art Brut means the set of artistic artefacts made at the beginning of the twentieth century by patients hospitalized in the former psychiatric clinics.

3   An example is the project "Maasai Living Cultures" by Pitt Rivers Museum, available at: https://bit.ly/3oaLfeJ (page visited on 19th September 2022).

4   This experiment prompted the virtual collaboration with the MEM – Museo Missionario Colle Don Bosco, through its curator, Letizia Pecetto, and with the Ethnographic Museum of Missioni Don Bosco ONLUS, through its curator, Elisabetta Gatto: for the "World Music Day" (21st June 2020) pictures of musical instruments preserved at the three museums were published on the social media of the three institutions, a musical piece was associated to each picture, in which the relevant instrument played.

5   It is, in particular, a collection of glass photographic plates by "Carlo Sesti" (Pennacini 1999; 2000) and three photographic albums of the collection "Carlo Vittorio Musso" (Grasso 2019; 2021). In the first case, it is a series of shots taken by engineer Giuseppe Carlo Sesti (1873-1954) from Modena at the beginning of the twentieth century, while working for the construction companies of the State railways in Congo Free State, which became Belgian Congo after 1908. The collection "Carlo Vittorio Musso", instead, is made up by three albums of printed photos taken in Italian Somaliland between 1920 and 1923, from which a particular part of the history of the Italian colonial conquest in the Horn of Africa is revealed, i.e. that between the liberal era and the fascist imperialist period.

6   As an example we mentioned a webinar entitled "Missionari e Viaggiatori d'Africa negli archivi e nei musei" [Missionaries and travellers in archives and museums] and the series of three talk entitled respectively "I Direttori si incontrano" [Directors meet], "La giovane donna di Gebelein" [Gebelein's young woman] e "Dietro le vetrine" [Behind the windows], carried out for the exhibition "An anthropologist's view. Connections with the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin", opened on 13th June 2020 at the Egyptian Museum in Turin. The exhibition aimed at rebuilding the relations between Egyptology e Anthropology over the centuries and at identifying avenues of research and future collaborations.

7   The *insight* trend of the Facebook page and of the Instagram page was monitored from the beginning and showed a continuous increase of *followers* and of interactions, such as *likes*, shares and comments during the first lockdown (9th March – 3rd June 2020). Also through Google Analytics it was possible to follow the development of the Web site of the museum, where the number of new users increased steadily and where the articles concerning the two columns "in libera uscita" [on leave] were the most read.

8   In order to define *digital contact zone,* reference is made to James Clifford and to his definition of "museums as contact zones" (1999).

"I'm Mosuo": an example of narrative of the Collective Self on the digital platform WeChat

1   System of phonetic transcription of the Chines language, officially introduced in 1958.
2   Original text: 诚挚的欢迎所有朋友投稿，通过我是摩梭人平台向世人诉说摩梭的人，摩梭事，摩梭的文化。
3   The use of Italics was the author's choice.
4   Original text: 继承，保护和弘扬摩梭文化，让世界看到一个真正摩梭。也希望社会各界人士，尊重文化的神圣，不要为了一点点利益和吸引游客而杜撰一个子虚乌有的摩梭文化。
5   Original text: 2015年左右我在福建读大学，大学里的很多同学对我们民族的文化历史、泸沽湖、民族服饰等内容很很想深入了解和研究，处于对自己的民族热爱，我想让世界上有更多的人了解我们的民族，来到泸沽湖！然后就决定自己建立一个公众号，分享一些和摩梭相关的内容。
6   The ethnic majority in China, which accounts for roughly 92% of the Chinese population.
7   *Gemu* is the goddess protecting crops and the Mosuo people. Her feast his celebrated on the 25th day of the 7th lunar month.
8   In Mosuo language "jia" means "beautiful", while "cuo" means "dance". *Jiacuo* dance develops in a semicircle and both men and women take part in it. The dance moves were originally accompanied by 72 melodies, but only 13 came down to our day.

Antropologia della contemporaneità

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The series "Anthropology of Contemporary World" should serve as space for reflection, sharing, debate and in-depth anthropological study. The guiding thread of this series is questioning about the social and cultural settings we are living in, starting from the recognition of the simultaneousness we are all immersed in. Contemporary ethnographic research and classics of that discipline can help build, in different ways, that particular counterintuitive awareness which is the strength of the anthropology and can offer an unexpected perspective: in this view one can understand situations, contexts, conflicts, dynamics, discourses, organizations and practices which need to be clarified.

This collection adopts a double-blind peer review system.

Titoli pubblicati

1. Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shrimam Venkatraman, Xinyuan Wang. *Come il mondo ha cambiato i social media*.
2. Francesco Faeta, *La passione secondo Cerveno. Arte, tempo, rito.*
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9. Cecilia Tamplenizza, *La capoeira angola: un'etnografia tra Brasile e Italia.*
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12. Dario Nardini, *Surfers Paradise. Un'etnografia del surf sulla Gold Coast australiana.*
13. A cura di Angela Biscaldi e Vincenzo Matera, *Social media e politiche dell'identità.*
14. Richard Rechtman, *Le viventi.*
15. Angela Biscaldi, Daniela Danna, Chiara Quagliariello, *Nella pancia delle donne. Prospettive socio-antropologiche sulla gravidanza nella società globale.*
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18. A cura di Cecilia Gallotti e Federica Tarabusi, *Antropologia e servizi: intersezioni etnografiche fra ricerca e applicazione.*

19. Umberto Cao, "Para todos la luz. Para todos todo." *Etnografia di una resistenza civile per e attraverso l'elettricità nel Messico profondo.*
20. Giovanna Santanera, *Diritti mediati. Antropologia digitale e domanda di asilo politico in Italia*
21. Edited by Angela Biscaldi and Vincenzo Matera, *Social media and politics of identity*

In this book, the authors analyse the political aspects of identity, namely the role of digital platforms in setting up symbolic systems, shared knowledge, feelings of belonging, inclusion and exclusion dynamics, innovation and social transformation movements.

Based on some ethnographic case studies, they address the growing aspect of *interreality* that such processes entail: actually, social media created a hybrid social space which puts the digital world and our physical world in constant interaction, with a direct impact on the construction processes of reality and of individual and collective identities.

The anthropological gaze as a critical knowledge of current practices and representations proves to be an essential tool to analyse these dynamics, due to its ability to focus and to construe the ways for new forms of negotiation and reproduction of the participants' identities, but also for new forms of resistance and social change, to become apparent and consolidate in social platforms.