

# **What a Marvellous Event: The Ever Becoming of an Italian Village**

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## WHAT A MARVELLOUS EVENT – The Ever Becoming of an Italian Village

*No one lives in the world in general* (Geertz 1996: 262)

### **Abstract**

Place is here defined as a space given social, cultural, and historical meaning through an ongoing intervention of people who are objects as well as subjects within this process. Thus place can be seen as a continuously ongoing (re)creation process lived by its inhabitants. This work intends to put forth and illustrate parts of this process.

Fieldwork was carried out in Monte, the fictive name of a small village situated about an hour's drive from Rome, Italy. In order to show how place may be used as an analytical concept, three different ways in which this particular local (re)creation process takes place will be presented, where-after a theoretical discussion follows. The first example comes from Montese<sup>1</sup> social life, the second from the village cemetery and the last comes from the yearly pilgrimages dedicated to the local patron saint.

### **A web of intense exchanges and social relations that are continually being recreated**

One of my working methods during a one month long fieldwork in Monte in the spring of 2009 was to walk around in the village together with single informants, asking them to choose where to go and to speak freely about whatever came to their minds while looking at the surroundings and the ongoing street life.

During these walks, which all took place in *il centro storico* (the historical centre) of the village, I never got any comments about the physical setting, like for example the beauty of some of the buildings or, the opposite, the ugliness of tumbledown buildings or any comments whatsoever on buildings or other landmarks as such. None of my informants mentioned for example the statue commemorating Montesi soldiers who died during World War II or the site where once there was a house which was bombed during the same war. Today this site is simply enclosed by a railing in bad condition. Nor did my informants seem interested in taking any new routes compared to their usual ones or in walking in the surroundings of the village (if not to visit their own cultivations).

They spoke all the more about the people living there; who they were and how they were interrelated. They also told stories from their childhood (middle-aged and old Montesi all grew up in *il centro storico*) and about the Montese way of living. As the village has only about 3 000 inhabitants, people know each other to a large extent, and while walking together with my informants and listening to them I observed them greeting the people we met, stopping to have a chat with them and/or to introduce me, or popping into someone whose house we were passing by. Thus, these walks, so full of life and spontaneous encounters, also gave me the opportunity to study naturally occurring meetings (cf. Kusenbach 2003: 475-476).

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Monte is a conglomerate of very many and very intense social relations. The more I get to know this place the more this stands out to me and the more I understand the strength and the meaning of these relations. Indeed, they very strongly root the individual in the social soil. Every day is an intensively ongoing social process and networks of social relations are continually being created and recreated. Observing outdoor life, I could see for example how people met for a spontaneous chat in the streets of the village on their way to their daily activities. Housewives taking their kids to school and shopping for fresh food in the morning often joined each other for a coffee at one of the many bars, discussing what to cook for

lunch. Old men met in the *piazza* in the morning and in the old people's centre in the afternoon. As I was in Monte in May and that, my informants told me, is the month of *la Madonna*, I also had the opportunity to see how groups of mainly elderly women met each afternoon in order to pray at the small outdoor altars dedicated to *la Madonna* which are to be found all over the village.

People also meet in the church and at various religious or communal festivities. Some of these events are old, like the pilgrimages (see below), while others are newly introduced, as for example historical plays and feasts promoting locally produced food. The latter being something which people are very proud of and which also contribute to the Montese identity (Carlestål 2006: 12).

Informal visits in the homes are frequent and often small gifts are handed over on these occasions. I too got involved in this system already on my first visit to Monte a few years ago: An old man used to knock on my door with his beautifully carved walking stick on his way back home from his cultivations in order to hand over vegetables or a couple of eggs, while a series of very many invitations to lunch and dinner was started by one of my neighbours calling from her window to mine and asking me to come over for lunch after we had greeted one another for the very first time at the hairdresser's the day before.

On all these just mentioned occasions as well as when going errands and assisting one another in different ways, people also get updated about one another's doings as well as about friends and relatives in common. So if, for example, they hear that someone is ill, they will go to see that person, and when someone dies, the news spreads very quickly and many will attend the wake as well as the funeral (see below). What I would like to point out with these examples is not *what* people do for one another, but the *frequency* and the *extent* of these interactions. As I said, this is what Monte is – a web of intense exchanges and social relations that are continually being recreated.

It is the people that count and as shown above, people are also what my informants talked about during our walks in *il centro storico*. They did not speak about the physical setting. A telling example of this focus on people was when one day one of my neighbours and I were on our way home after a walk together and a lorry stopped and the driver asked for a certain address. My neighbour looked a bit confused at first and then she asked who the man was looking for. As soon as she heard the name of that person, she kindly explained the way to the driver. This took place in the new part of Monte, a couple of blocks from where my neighbour has been living for years, still she did not know the name of the street asked for. She is not the only one; I have several times been told that street names are of little use, but instead people refer to the persons living there.

Living in Monte signifies that one will never be lost or unknown, but part of a dense web of relations. This has, of course, its pros and cons – my informants speak about help on the one hand and enviousness and social control on the other. On the positive side you know that whenever needed, there will always be someone there for you. On the negative side you are not always free to choose what to do, where to go, with whom to go etcetera as people might start talking. A couple of female friends of mine told how hard, not to say impossible, it is to go against this mentality. They have not succeeded though they are intellectually fully aware of how the social system works and they would very much like to be free to make their own choices. The system is simply stronger than they are.

### **A Montese never dies**

My second example comes from Monte's cemetery. The visits to this place were never part of the village walks in my first example, but it was my either asking informants heading to the cemetery if I could join them or asking informants if we could go there together.

The cemetery was once situated outside the village, but due to the extension of the village beginning with the economic boom a decade after World War II it is nowadays situated in between the historical centre and the modern part of the village. Thus, it is within easy reach for the whole community.

What strikes the visitor entering the cemetery, apart from the magnificent view over the valley deep below, is the abundance of fresh flowers and the much activity going on. During weekdays it is mainly women who come here to clean the graves of their dead family members, to decorate the graves with flowers and to pray. I have heard of women coming here every day and informants sometimes tell about social pressure, constraining people to keep the graves in perfect shape, and about the cost of fresh flowers. On Saturdays and Sundays it is more common also to see men visiting the graves and likewise people may do so in connection with, for example, special family occasions like weddings and confirmations.

According to Foucault, a cemetery does not constitute ‘the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but “the other city” where each family possesses its dark resting place’ (1986: 25). However, my experience in Monte is quite the opposite. The cemetery *is* the sacred and immortal heart of the village and, moreover, it is also a vital part of Monte – ‘a meeting place’ as one of my informants said. Walking with my informants among the graves resembled very much walking together in the village, being introduced to people we met (with the difference that now we did not meet them in person but only as photos on their graves), and told how people were related to one another. At the cemetery both dead and alive are included in these talks.

The relations among the dead are moreover mirrored by the location of their remains. Talking about the dead and placing their graves in accordance with kin relations are ways of curing and continuously recreating the relations among both living and dead. Another single but very obvious example of the curing of relations among the dead was when a young boy died in an accident and a photo of him was placed on the grave of his cousin, who also died young. Tending the graves and visiting them on particular occasions in order to include them in the celebrations are also all parts of these processes, as are the walks in the cemetery together with the anthropologist. It all shows that the dead are important members of the community and their memory lives long – as one informant said: ‘a Montese never dies’.

Visiting the cemetery together with my informants, I felt an intimacy between them and the place. To use Geertz’ words, there was ‘a pervading air of “we belong here”’ (1996: 260). The cemetery with its dead situated right in the middle of the village and very frequented, certainly is central to village life. The same goes for funerals, which are important ‘social occasions’ (Goffman 1963: 18) that anyone may join without being close to the dead or to his or her family. The occasion is a collective rite, where death and life, past and future meet and it becomes impossible to separate the village and its inhabitants, dead or alive, from one another. As the priest said when asking the congregation to join him in a prayer for a deceased woman at a funeral I visited: While we pray for her *lei prega per noi, suo paese* (she will pray for us, her village).

### **The yearly pilgrimages**

Twice a year a good part of the Montesi go on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of their local patron saint with the fictive name San Vito<sup>ii</sup>. There are neither any historical proofs of the Saint nor is he officially recognized by the Catholic Church, but according to the local tradition San Vito was Monte’s first bishop and he held this position in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. At one point, however, he felt forced to leave the community after having been the victim of a conspiracy. He settled in a cave approximately thirteen kilometres away from Monte and stayed there for seven years. After this long period of isolation, feeling that his life was

coming to an end, San Vito decided to go back to the village. There he soon died, but the villagers including his former enemies, recognizing miracles taking place on his return, now acknowledged him as a saint. This was the definitive local victory of Christianity over paganism and San Vito has ever since been the villagers' much venerated patron saint.

The two yearly pilgrimages follow exactly the same pattern. It is a revival of San Vito's departure from Monte, his exile, and his return. It begins by the villagers, many of whom in their teens, gathering early in the morning in *la piazza* (the square) in front of the church situated in *il centro storico*. At a set time the priest comes out of the church together with San Vito's fraternity, the former carrying a reliquary and the other men, all dressed in long white shirts, carrying a painting of the Saint and a crucifix. The priest and the fraternity take the lead as the procession starts walking out of the village chanting a song dedicated to San Vito.

On the border between the village and its surrounding countryside the procession makes its first halt. The priest together with the congregation say a prayer after which he wishes all *una buona giornata* (a nice day) and hands over the relic to the fraternity. The procession starts walking again. The next stop is on a hillock from which the pilgrims can have a last view of Monte. Here San Vito's fraternity and the women present sing antiphons – hallelujah to San Vito and to the Madonna. Thereafter the confraternity take off their long shirts or tie them up, the procession loosens and the long walk to San Vito's sanctuary continues informally.

Most of us make a short stop at a bar situated not very far from the sanctuary before, after more than three hours' walk, arriving at the cave where San Vito spent his long exile. On the steps of the sanctuary, situated right on the top of the Saint's cave, the priest, who has now joined us by car, says a Mass after which the participants go down to the cave to pray individually at a small altar, light a candle and kiss the pictures of the Saint. Until recently people also took small pieces of tuff from the walls of the cave to bring back home. This, however, is not allowed any longer.

It is now time for *il pranzo*, the principal meal of the day for the Italians. The picnics brought consist of complete meals including wine, and people of all ages sit down family wise on the grass to eat. But it is not long before many start walking around, chatting with friends while being invited to share the meal with them. Everywhere wine is offered around. A couple of men have brought their instruments and singing, this time worldly songs some of which are very frolicsome, takes place. It is a very lively and cheerful occasion. Though San Vito is said to have lived extremely ascetically eating only wild herbs while in exile, this is not the case for his pilgrims. At least this is not so any longer, but according to some informants the pilgrims once used to have a very simple meal on this day.

At the sanctuary many villagers have joined us by car and when it is time to return to Monte most of us who walked there now ask to get a lift back home. Thus, it is only the fraternity and very few other pilgrims who start the long procession back. On their return a few hours later the Montesi with the priest and the mayor at the head awaiting them on the village border will hear them singing hallelujah as they are approaching. The relic is returned to the priest, who back in the church places it so that all the Montesi will have the possibility to kiss it, before it is returned to the crypt.

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Many Montesi have told me that the villagers have to make this pilgrimage twice a year in order to keep the right to the ground where the sanctuary is situated, as it does not belong to Monte but to a neighbouring village. However, neither the parish priest nor anybody

else has been able to give me any details about the agreement between the two villages. It seems therefore also to be part of the oral tradition.

Formalities apart, the pilgrimage dedicated to San Vito and reflecting an important phase of his life is a means of reviving the foundation of Monte as a Christian community. Religion is strong here and the local base of this very congregation would be lost if the pilgrimage did not take place.

It is interesting that San Vito's sanctuary is uninhabited and situated rather far outside the municipality of Monte, though this is not something unique. According to Hirsch (1995: 4) it gives a sanctuary a great potentiality. Perhaps the hardships of the long walk (26 kilometres back and forth) have a meaning per se. It is a fact, however, that the procession can be watched by non villagers which I believe strengthens the sense of community and belonging among its participants. I also think that the common belief that the pilgrimage must take place twice a year further strengthens their commitment to it, as does the affinity with the generations who before them have taken part in the pilgrimage. Thus, everyone participating in this rite helps uphold, I would say, the most important tradition of Monte, and they thereby help recreate the village as *the* place of the Montesi as well as their identity as Christians.

### **A theoretical discussion**

Though places have always been described by anthropologists until recently we have not problematized and regarded the concept *place* as a theoretical issue per se in contrast to philosophers and geographers, for example (see e.g. Casey 2001: 683-693) and logically processes of place making have therefore not been the direct object of our studies (see e.g. Geertz 1996: 259). Instead of asking how understandings of locality are formed and lived, place has too often been thought of as something given (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6), assumed to be nothing but unproblematic settings where things happen (Rodman 2003: 204). How many articles and books are there not which begin with a short presentation of the physical setting where a certain study took place and there-after nothing more is said about the place as such.

But place is so much more – a concept well worth studies of its own and in agreement with Fog Olwig and Hastrup, I believe that “it is only through rich ethnographic studies that space and place – and what we make of them in human relations – can be examined” (1997: 8). Above I have therefore presented three local examples of repetitive processes that continually recreate a place fictively called Monte. Giving prominence to processes of place making, as this study does, highlights the fact that people do not only “interact within physically defined areas that carry meaning and they do so in particular ways” (Pellow 2003: 160), but in doing so they also recreate their place in praxis.

Thus, place is not something static but a *process* lived by individuals who construct multiple meanings of it at particular times (cf. Rodman 2003: 204-223). In this project place has therefore been defined as a space given social, cultural, and historical meaning through an ongoing intervention of people who are themselves objects as well as subjects within this process.

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People have always been on the move. These movements have increasingly received more and more attention by researchers representing different disciplines, who study among other things the effects of today's migration and globalization on cultures and peoples' identity. These scholars show how boundaries are loosening up and how cultures are to an ever lesser extent tied to a certain spot on the map. It goes without saying that globalization has to a large

extent de-territorialized people. The same goes for identity, which is not any longer as strongly anchored in a certain place as it used to be. It would be a mistake, however, to disregard the fact that parallel with these trends, a given place may still remain utterly central to man. This goes not least for the Italians among whom *campanilismo* (local patriotism) has long been regarded as a cultural characteristic (Carlestål 2005: 160-165).

In Monte a local saying goes *il montese come la lepre, dove nasce muore* (the Montese, like the hare, where he is born he will die). In accordance with this, informants tell that the Montesi tend to stay on in their native village to a larger extent compared to people in the surrounding villages. The explanation given to me, by the Montesi themselves as well as by some persons from two of the surrounding villages, whom I met on a couple of occasions, is that the Montesi are harder working compared to the others. Thus, when after World War II many people in the area decided to migrate to work in the big north Italian cities or abroad, the Montesi did not. Instead they chose what is regarded as the harder way, which means that many men commuted by special workmen's buses on a daily or a weekly basis the long way to Rome, where they worked as manual labourers during the boom of the building industry. The outcome, according to local discourse, is that hard working and very capable people have remained in Monte, while neighbouring villages were drained of their best manpower.

Today's young ones to a large extent take part in the recreation processes of Monte by settling down in their native village upon marriage. I have watched here, as I have watched elsewhere in Italy, how parents strive hard for years to supply their children with a home of their own upon their marriage. It might be a house or a flat that used to belong to the older generation, which is now being renovated for the next generation to take over (people tend to keep houses that belong to the family even when for the time being no one is living there – one day it might serve a child or a grandchild, they say) or a newly built house. If the man and the woman marrying are both Montesi they most certainly will therefore settle in Monte, even if it means that they have to commute (nowadays by car) to one of the nearby towns to earn their living.

If one of them is not from Monte, but that is where the couple decides to settle, the social system has the capacity to include the person moving in. The same goes for people who without any previous relations move into the village permanently or, like me, for a shorter period. Remember my getting vegetables from one neighbour and another neighbour calling from her window inviting me for lunch on my first visits to Monte. It was they so to speak choosing me and not the anthropologist working hard on getting informants. These relations have moreover grown and deepened ever since and are upheld through telephone calls in both directions when I go back home to Sweden.

This shows that it goes without saying that the village lives on in spite of the fact that it offers very little when it comes to schools and working opportunities. Thus, at the same time as the activity of *il Pro Loco* (meaning 'for the place'; an office promoting local culture and tourism) is slowly dying down, there are no signs that the same thing is happening to Monte. On the contrary, I would say, thinking of the development of the modern part of Monte and its many huge villas.

#### *A means of controlling the recreation process*

Monte also lives on in spite of the complaints about enviousness and control that I often overheard or was told about, the most serious of which being the two women expressing a particularly strong wish to be able to live according to their own ideas and beliefs (see above). How come that they, seemingly so strong and capable in many ways, are not capable of disregarding the social control of the society?

According to Pred, people do not produce a place under conditions of their own choosing, but in the context of already existing, directly encountered structures (1986: 198). A place thus produced serves as a tool of thought and of action as well as a means of control, domination, and power (Lefebvre 1974: 26). It therefore demands competence and performance (conscious or not) from its participants not to let it fall apart. My two informants are probably more consciously aware of these demands and social mechanisms than most villagers, which means that they know that in a small village like Monte, which permits no inhabitant to escape from the verdict of his or her co-villagers, the price for being divergent is higher than most individuals are willing to pay. Thus, a place controls the means of its self-production (Appadurai 1995: 217)

Competence and performance are therefore also what is asked from people moving into Monte and as long as they show their willingness to act accordingly, they are not only accepted but they will be regarded as Montesi, as both informants from the original population as well as people moving into Monte themselves have confirmed in their conversations with me. Personally I have been asked if I would like to settle in the village myself and become Montese. This is quite contrary to my experience from carrying out a longer fieldwork in Sicily, South Italy, where the individual never becomes a full member of a place except his or her place of birth (Carlestål 2005: 160-165).

People moving into Monte and becoming Montesi clearly show that the recreation process is also a process *per se*, that is, it is an open process ready to accept novelties as long as these do not put the place at risk. Novelties like the newly introduced local festivities mentioned above are other examples of novelties that rather than putting the place at risk, confirm and strengthen the villagers' roots in this particular social soil. But the foreigner not willing to perform according to local standards of conduct, on the other hand, will remain an outsider.

### **Concluding remarks**

In spite of modern anthropology having abandoned the idea of places as bounded cultures, showing how the Montesi live and make their place meaningful to them, I want to ally myself with those who likewise disagree with "the need for their blanket removal in contexts of so-called 'globalization'" (Coleman and Collins 2006: 4) for as Geertz once wrote "no one lives in the world in general" (1996: 262).

Hence I have shown how to study the ever becoming of an Italian village by calling attention to concrete place-particular practices and repetitive processes. Though it is not exactly the same place that is being recreated, it still is *the* place for the Montesi, the place that they can and certainly do identify with and to which they have multiple attachments.

The intense local social networking, the intimacy with its dead members, and the pilgrimages all provide a focus for feelings of shared history and belonging. I find that Basso expressed these sentiments almost poetically once writing that "[f]ueled by sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness to the past, sense of place roots individuals in the social and cultural soils from which they have sprung together, holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood" (Basso 1996: 85).

Defining place as a social, cultural and historical process and giving concrete examples of this process is as if we were looking at Monte as an ever ongoing local event. What a marvellous event!

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<sup>i</sup> The adjective of Monte. The plural of which is Montesi.

<sup>ii</sup> The old tradition (almost abandoned today) of naming a boy after the local Saint, whose real name is only to be found in this particular village, can be seen as a way of producing 'local subjects' (Appadurai 1995:205).