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## Religion and Culture of Origin. Re-Shaping Identity in the Integration Process: A Case Study in Sicily

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**Abstract** What happens when people of different cultures, values, religion live together? Sociological studies on immigrative phenomenon often swing between immigration and integration policies. These policies actually reveal the difficulty of the host society to institutionalize new models of social differences accompanying multiculturalism. Immigrants who “arrive” continue their life in a place where they do not passively participate in the passing of time, but become actors. Pressed by the hegemonic culture of the host society to adapt, do not cease to practice their religious and origin cultural expressions, often in conditions of urban spatial and social marginalization, they resist assimilation with ethnic persistence strategies. Considering the impact of religion and origin cultural values on expression of differences, it is important to consider their role in the integration process. And, above all—facilitate or hinder integration? These dynamics have been analyzed in a research study on immigrants’ integration process in Palermo. The main results are presented in this paper. In this case study, the research’s data hypothesizes a theoretical model of integration in which immigrants, free to express their religious and cultural differences, tend to reduce their perception of minority.

**Keywords** Integration; Religion; Identity; Multiculturalism; Adaptation; Assimilation

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International migrations produce profound social changes in receiving societies. In varying contexts of reception, immigration is followed predictably by immigrants’ adaptation efforts towards culture of receiving society. Their modes of integration may take a variety of forms within the society. The possible outcomes (welcoming, indifference, or hostility) are shaped by the complex interaction of the contexts of incorporation, into which the immigrants are received by society, with the resources and adaptations of immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). The increasing number of immigrants in Europe and the recent terrorist attacks gave rise to fear and insecurity. The public debate frequently focuses on the role of religion and cultural values of immigrants as main barriers to immigrant integration in Europe, impossible to reconcile with Western lifestyle. It shows that different modes in living religiosity can explain immigrants’ integration process. The main European integration models are in decline or in crisis (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) right at a time when political rhetoric revolves around the contradictions of emergency actions. That is because the *integration policies* have pushed immigrants, uprooted by choice or necessity from their context of origin, to live on the cultural and physical margins of the host societies. These policies reveal the difficulty of our societies in institutionalizing new patterns of social differences associated with multiculturalism. On the one hand, they protected the cultural hegemony of the host society, on the other hand—they underestimated the importance of the expression of minority differences, pushing ethnic specificities to a convergence of immigrants’ values and culture towards the local ones. The immi-

grant who “arrives” continues his/her life in a place where he/she does not passively participate in the passing of time, but he/she becomes an actor. Immigrant communities populate places where they work, consume, meet. They do not stop practicing their religious and cultural expressions of origin. The debate on the role of the religious dimension in the cultural identity processes of the societies is complicated by the immigration flows and the effects of assimilation policies. In some cases, religion is a factor of irreducible difference, in others, it is a factor of integration. As to the construction of identity processes (Seidler 1986; Cochran 1998), the central question concerns: How can religion contribute to the debate about identity? This implies a series of considerations on issues related to the collective identity (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). How to permit the respect of ethnic traditions that are intolerable in the West? How much tolerance are Western societies able to activate to facilitate integration processes? This question underlies another: How much freedom are Western societies willing to grant to the public practices of immigrants which are different from their own? Until now, their response has been contradictory: practices are tolerated as long as they do not violate our laws. This article presents results from a research carried out in Palermo, a city of South Italy where immigrants’ integration process has effects on identities of ethnic communities who are self-perceived and are perceived by natives as “different” for language, religion, culture. The analysis of the research data is focused on a case study from which to propose a general theory about immigrants’ integration in which immigrants tend to assimilate easier and tend to lean towards faster integration

when: 1) there are wide spaces in the expression of religious and cultural differences of origin, 2) integration policies facilitate citizenship rights, from work to the regularization of legal status. The case study presented shows this.

### Research Methodology and Theoretical Context

The research aims at analyzing the role of religion and culture of origin in the process of integration of immigrants with the local community, in which the independent variable is the degree of freedom enjoyed by immigrants in the public expression of ethnic differences. This case study integrates qualitative data and ethnographic observation. The approach adapted to develop the research pattern is the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1974). The non-participant observation and statistical data used complete the description of the investigated scenarios. The data collection was carried out in 2016, through 60 interviews to immigrants residing in Palermo, grouped by age, gender, and ethnicity. The ages of respondents ranges between 20 and 60 years. All Maghrebians interviewed are Muslims, as are the members of the Bangladeshi community. Those from Eastern Europe are almost all Orthodox Christian. The sub-Saharan ethnic groups mainly belong to Evangelist, Catholic, and Muslim cults. The Tamil interviewed are evenly distributed between the Hindu and Catholic faiths.

Using a semi-structured format, the interviews investigated: biographical paths; faith and religious values; public and private daily practices; cultural and religious practices. The analysis examined

moreover the reasons for the choice of country of emigration, and the experiences of subjective identity in the spheres of religion. For each of these areas, analyzed through content analysis. In the analysis of the data, a multi-theoretical framework was used to broaden the perspectives of understanding the phenomena. Among these the theory of the status passage (Glaser and Strauss 1971), in which society is considered as a network of dynamic and changing relationships, pushing to reflect on the new representations and configurations in which the social decomposes and recomposes. The original theoretical datum of this research, I believe, is to add the frame of the status passage of immigrants, which in the original analysis of emergent theory of status passage was undersized. The model of status passage resulted particularly useful in redefining identity in acculturation processes, but above all in those of integration where real status changes happen. In these cases, the social actors involved are: the immigrant as the passagee (the one who is involved in the passage); the community of the natives as agent (implicated in conferring the shape of the passage and its control). The relations between the two poles take place in the arena (or context) of the host society of Palermo. The effects of relationships determine reciprocally effects on new identity and structural configurations, both for the immigrants and the native community. In the case of immigrants, the transition from irregulars, aliens, guests, to integrated individuals occurs, but in a segmented way of the different areas of sociality, work, identity. In the case of the native community, for the new configurations of multiethnic society that must reorganize the integration policies in order to respond to unpublished rights and duties social issues.

In the following analysis, I report extracts of the interviews I consider most relevant to the description and understanding of the phenomena investigated. The theoretical perspective of the “differential adaptation” (De La Garza and Ono 2015) has qualitatively outlined the analysis of the innovation/ethnic-persistence dialectics. The decision to refer to ethnicity rather than nationality was due to the sociological relevance of the factors that constitute and distinguish ethnic groups: a name, myths of descendency, a shared history, a shared culture, a sense of solidarity among the members, and the reference to a territory, even if it is different from that in which you live (Smith 1998:52). These factors define the differences among individuals of the research’ target population. The research excluded native Palermians, choosing to focus on the perception of difference by immigrants. That is, on those who express their identity through distinctive factors in a foreign world.

Background research gave shape to the hypothesis that to greater freedom enjoyed by immigrants in the expression of public differences would correspond the reduction in their being perceived as a cultural minority in multicultural contexts where adaptation is declined through syncretism, cultural contagions, and assimilation. I have defined also the field of study using hypotheses and theories that in literature have provided significant answers on the issues in question, starting from the definition of integration. Defining integration is complicated. It does not mean to circumscribe the semantic field, but to give it a political intention and a social value. Integration is the daily experience of meeting between different entities. It is a process that

should ideally lead to a high level of social cohesion and reciprocity. About integration as path, scholars (Penninx, Spencer, and Van Hear 2008) seem to agree that in determining the degree of integration of immigrants, the focus should be placed on the importance of subjective and institutional variables (work, legal status, local immigration policies, etc.). Penninx and Martiniello (2007) define integration as *the process of becoming an accepted part of society*. In this definition, the final outcome is desired, but not certain. In immigration research, the use of the term is alternated with programmatic definitions for new analysis. For example, integration and assimilation are terms often used interchangeably. In Alba and Nee (1997), the concept of assimilation is used less and less because of the disappearance in immigration discourse of “ethnic” and “racial” to define identity characteristics. Today these distinctive elements tend to be conveyed in a more politically correct concept of “cultural differences.” Adaptation and assimilation are terms that seem to chase each, when trying to define an immigrant’s integration process when the end goal is the similarity with the local population.

Some ethnic groups (Amish, Jews, etc.) emphasize religion as the core determinant of identity (Gordis and Ben-Horin 1991). Others use religion as a means to preserve cultural traditions and ethnic boundaries (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). This is to say that religious fervor in immigrant communities serves two purposes: first, as an actual devotion to the religious symbols and rituals; secondly, to create a cultural support system for immigrants filtering external influences of mainstream local culture in order to preserve communal solidarity

in an ethnic immigrant community (Christ 2016). Many scholars seem to converge on the idea that religion is an important component in collective experiences of migrants (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003), from the decision to leave to the support in settlement process. According to Hirschman (2004), migrants' paths are accompanied by religion that offers functions of: refuge, respect, resources. In this model, the analyzed experiences hypothesize how religion, places of religious expression (churches, mosques, temples), and the relative institutions provide, in addition to spiritual support, various types of resources (information for housing or work, language courses) that allow immigrants to face many of the problems encountered in the process of settlement in an alien community. More complex is the model of Portes and DeWind (2004) which describes the different roles played by religions in the immigrants' integration processes. It is in this model that religion is a point of support for the processes of selective acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Moreover, "religion plays a crucial role in the construction of identity, in the reproduction of meanings and in the formation of values" (Levitt 2003:251). This function is particularly important in the alienating experience of the migrant, that far from the original context in which everything was familiar, usual, ordered, predictable tackles pressing existential and identity questions. Separated from many aspects of previous life, immigrants often cling to religion as an element of continuity and connection to their own world.

In conclusion, at a time when the migration experience changes the connotations of collective iden-

tity, culture, and religious values are a set of traditions and granite rituals that individuals express in reality. Culture and values are not immutable. The dynamic nature of their interweaving reproduces and recreates in social interactions, points of contact, and balance with the social reality, faced for the first time. According to Bruce (1992), this interpretation underestimates the deepest convictions that guide individuals in shaping a sense of belonging to the one's own community, in relation to religion. Two examples of this hypothesis, which in the research were analyzed in a comparative key, are: the Islamic *ummah* and Hindu *dharma*. The comparative focus on these communities depends on the fact that in the first case, Islam is the second religion professed in Italy. In the second, the Hindus in their path of acculturation are the protagonists of a religious syncretism.

### The General Scenario

Palermo is Sicily's administrative capital and one of the largest cities in South Italy. It is a city with a strong multi-ethnic historical, architectural, and religious identity. Today Palermo is one of the main landing and reception points of immigrants rescued through humanitarian missions in the Mediterranean Sea. The vestiges of ancient Arab, Norman, Byzantine, Angevin, and Spanish colonizations are present in its urban structure. Palermo hosts a Grand Mosque. Recently the Catholic Church has allowed the use of a church to the "Jewish brothers," for their religious activities. Palermo is a city in the midst of a great transformation, in which changes are driven by events both economic and cultural, but also by forms of mul-

tiethnic contagion influenced by a mix of global and local forces, that can be considered, on the one hand, a logical consequence of economic development (thanks, for example, to the entrepreneurial vitality of immigrants, which benefits the local wealth and employment rate); on the other hand, these forces also contribute to cultural and anthropological changes, because of all forms of *reverse multiculturalism* adapted by natives thanks to the presence of immigrants. In this form of multiculturalism, the native community integrates with the immigrant community. The latest statistics<sup>1</sup> (2016) reported a total foreign population of about 36,000 foreigners registered at the office of resident population, making up approximately 4% of the total resident population, with a growing annual trend of 2%. Palermo can be thought of as a multi-ethnic puzzle containing at least 128 different ethnic groups, if one considers, for example, that the Mauritian community in Palermo is comprised of 4 different ethnic groups (Hindu, Tamil, Telegu, and Marahati).

In general, the employment sectors in which immigrants from Southeast Asian countries and Eastern Europe find their place in Palermo are the private care (domestic workers and caregivers). Commerce for those coming from the countries of the Maghreb. The restaurant sector is "occupied" mainly by the Chinese. The residential distribution of immigrants in Palermo over the last decade is primarily a result of rental costs. For many years, the historical center of the city was the primary residential neighborhood of immigrants. Today, immigrants

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://osservatoriomigrazioni.org/>. Retrieved July 04, 2019.

are distributed throughout the city, except in the wealthiest neighborhoods. Research has highlighted an important reversal in the trend of the period of residence of immigrants in the Sicilian capital. In the studies conducted by Cole and Booth (2006:26), Palermo was known among migrants as a place one could live and work undisturbed even without a residence permit, before dispersing to other places as soon as the permit was issued. Today, there is an increase in the number of immigrants residing in Palermo who do not want to leave, because they have a job and are joined by their families. From the political administrative point of view, freedom enjoyed by immigrants is high, above all in relation to that of immigrants resident in other Italian cities, where various municipal ordinances intended to exclude immigrants from the fruition of local welfare benefits, limiting working practices (such as sales of ethnic foods or street trading in the city center), banning religious symbols and practices. These *local policies of exclusion* (Ambrosini 2014) in Palermo have been totally absent. Indeed, in 2015, in the midst of an unprecedented flow of migrants, Palermo's administration has drafted and signed the "Carta di Palermo." It is a statement of intent that conceives *the right to mobility as a right to the human person* and dreams of *a citizenship of residence*. The paper wants to give answers to: How do immigration and security work together? Among the proposals of the document, one is in sharp contrast to the current national and European immigration laws: the abolition of the residence permit. The Mayor of Palermo, L. Orlando, promoted and supported this initiative declaring that whoever arrives in Palermo is Palermitan.



## The Biographical Path of Immigrants: The Reasons for the Choice of Country of Emigration

Often there are stories of those who flee from violence and poverty, caught among hope, illusion, and disillusion. The interviewees explain why they chose Palermo and Italy as their destination. The interviewees reveal that these places seem to have a strong appeal for some categories of immigrants. In many cases, Italy and Palermo are chosen because there is already a relative or an acquaintance who lives there, which can facilitate reception and integration. In this case, the bridging as social capital is a decisive factor in the choice of destination (Portes 1985) because through the social capital networks they enjoy information, imitative stimuli and logistic resources for the reception, accommodation, and help in finding work when they arrive. The religious factor of origin is another of the reasons for choosing Palermo and Italy, especially for Catholic immigrants, who do not seem to face the differences in religious values related to lifestyle.

Indian woman, 23: I came directly from India to Palermo. I decided to join my mother who had moved to Palermo for business reasons. Both for me and for my mother, the choice of Palermo was due to the presence of my aunt, and thanks to her we had the opportunity to be hosted immediately and quickly acclimatize.

Vietnamese woman, 37: I have been in Italy for over 15 years. I immediately came to live in Palermo. My sister was already living here, and so I decided to come to find a job in Italy. I chose Italy because Italy is the seat of the Vatican and of the Catholic Church.

And since I am Catholic, I wanted to feel at home. I have an Italian baptismal name given to me in Vietnam.

In other cases, experiences of emigration in other contexts in Northern Italy generate transfer decisions to the South where the difficulties of acculturation are fewer, the labor market is less regulated, and the climate of hostility is lower.

Bengali man, 30: Italy was for me a place where I could have a better future. After a year in Vicenza I decided to come to Palermo because the people of Northern Italy are colder, they are more racist, while in Sicily people are warmer and more willing to accept you.

As regards the decisions to migrate, the interviews not exclusively lead back to subjective initiatives, but family strategies for maximizing income and increase in welfare opportunities for the entire family unit. These strategies usually coincide with the paths of upward social mobility, according to the models of the places of destination. Sometimes these strategies are in open contradiction with the religious values and the family hierarchy of the origin country.

In these cases, it happens that the professional and family role of immigrant ethnic groups, traditionally linked to the restrictions of the roles of women, oscillates between persistence and innovation. As in the case of the extra-domestic work of Muslim and Hindu women. At the same time, the man reorganizes his social and family role also in the domestic context, both in work that he shares with his partner, either with its own limitations in terms of power

and authority, tending towards a greater symmetry with the partner. These role changes in the private sphere are identity bifurcations, turning point, in the biographical path of individuals that renegotiate with themselves and their own cultural world the fidelity values and the cost of identity treason.

Tunisian man, 44, Muslim: Since I have been in Palermo, the life I have with my wife has changed. She works outside the home to earn more. Maybe we were westernized. In fact, I do not feel the landlord. Now there are two.

Interviews indicate that for immigrants from Southeast Asia (especially for the Bengalis, the Mauritians, and the Sri Lankans Tamil and Sinhalese), their acculturation process is retained by differentiation of certain characteristics of the Western culture, such as: individualism, stress, or the lack of respect for the environment.

Among these Asian ethnic groups, Tamil and Sinhalese escaped from war and inter-ethnic conflicts. But, it is inevitable that the contact between the two hostile ethnic groups in the country of origin is different in the host city. They have no certainty of the final purpose of their journey, living with nostalgia and fear the return because it would mean going back to what they escaped from. This consciously transitory condition is only ideal because they know that they cannot return to their country of origin at least until a solution to the conflict is reached. This constraint, on the one hand, has accelerated the adaptation process; on the other hand, it has generated feelings of strong attachment to one's own land and to traditions even in a foreign land, in Palermo,

where is present the biggest Tamil community in Italy, active both on the political and religious level and for the maintenance of cultural traditions.

The immigration path is different for Mauritians, for whom the idea of the project is mainly economic. For them the permanence in Palermo is linked to the improvement of their economic condition. They are the most available to humble and tiring jobs, to cohabitation with compatriots to maximize savings. That is because their goal is the return and the pause is temporary. The habit of ethnic and religious multiculturalism in the country of origin is a cultural factor that facilitates socialization and the maintenance of one's own identity.

Mauritian man: I come from Mauritius, which have always been multicultural islands where all live in peace and we know how to live with different cultures. And the same I did here in Palermo.

## Faith and Religious Values. Re-Shaping Identity

Religion and values of origin seem to constitute strong elements of guidance to action. Such behaviors (both the prohibited and permitted) do not appear to be factors impeding integration. In fact, they are actual spiritual and emotional supports that help immigrants counterbalance the cultural stress of being uprooted. The analyzed data lead to confirm the value of religion for immigrants: a) as a medium to transmit values and cultural elements; b) as a spiritual, material, and social resource, that intervenes at different stages of the migration process, as shown by Ambrosini (2007). The

analyzed data showed that for some categories of immigrants the universe of values coincides with that of the religious sphere. There is an overlap in these dimensions, especially in the older cohorts of men and women of North African and Southeast Asian Muslims. Moral values related to good and evil continue to run parallel to what is permitted or forbidden by their faith, especially in the private sphere. Religious prohibitions are expressions of ethnic values onto which difference is radicalized. The clothing of Western women is judged by such immigrants as proof of the sexual objectification of women and the devaluation of their moral integrity.

Moroccan Muslim man, 30: I do not like that here the woman walks naked, wears her skirts too short. It is a provocation to us, men. The women in my country cannot go out uncovered, and they can only go outside if they are accompanied.

Bangladeshi Muslim man, married, 47: In Palermo, women are too free, they dress uncovered and are more social with men: for example, they kiss to say goodbye. I do not accept that my wife goes to work alone, or that she behaves and dresses like the Italian women. My daughter will be free to choose whom to marry, but the important thing is that he is a man who works, is honest, and Muslim.

Data also show that younger cohorts, more educated, and more recently come to reside in Palermo, exhibit a critical attitude towards traditional values, in regards to behavior in both the public and private spheres. This includes the cases of premarital sex, abortion, or homosexuality.

Ghanaian man, Muslim, 25: Although my religion would lead me to express another kind of thought, I believe that we are all now modern. So I consider prohibition of sex before marriage to be an outdated concept. About homosexuality: I have nothing against homosexuals.

In these cases, a high level of education seems to activate in people a critical reflection of the complex relationship between daily reality and the secularization of values. In my opinion, cultural adaptation is the deciding factor in the change of heart among these individuals who have been exposed to confusion and disorder in the course of a life that has lost its linearity, from country of origin to country of arrival, and which required an adaptation process forged through the autonomy of choices. But, behind the critical opinions of traditional values and their role in individual actions, there are more complex reasons based on the context in which one lives. In the construction of one's own life path, choices are made according to the pressures of one's environment.

Moroccan man, muslim, 35: Marrying an Italian woman whose religion and culture are different from mine would not be a problem; in fact, I'd like it, precisely because they have a freer mindset and culture. But, I would marry her only if she was ready to become a Muslim. I cannot change my religion. Since I came to Palermo, I haven't practiced my religion much. However, in my country, I follow all the religious precepts, such as in the case of divorce. Divorce is always a bad thing, although in the case of a divorce, only the man can ask it. Women can't allow themselves to, as the Qur'an states, and I agree.

In some communities, the culture of origin prevents the activation of perspectives of re-socialization that would be able to generate new identities. In terms of identity, the immigrant that transitions between past and present, it is not yet, and it is not anymore, sliding among roles and moving among different statuses.

The Mauritian community (mainly Hindu) in Palermo is a perfect example: Seemingly homogeneous in terms of religion and culture, after a first period in which the Mauritian immigrants face the typical crisis of cultural adaptation and occupational integration. Over time the community has revealed its heterogeneity, especially in regards to particularistic cultural expressions. The professed faiths depend on their immigration. At the time of English colonization, workers were recruited from various parts of India and employed on the island, where there were already other immigrants that other European colonizers had moved from other countries. As a result, this policy inadvertently brought together people of different beliefs, languages, and castes. A social order was created by spreading the identities in which social fates suffered the repercussions of estrangement, exploitation, and forced metissage. Already at that time for the homogeneous communities in a foreign land, religion satisfied the need for a guide to action and belonging, for emotional shelter in one's own group, where one could find customs, rituals, or symbols. But, different groups were completely separated from each other, and each group's members closely observed practices of ethnic self-preservation, such as the prohibition of mixed marriages. The groups are differentiated by their provenance from the Indian subcontinent and from the power

relations that, at the time of independence from England, were concentrated in the Hindu group. Thus, the Hindu, Tamil, Telegu and Marahati, different in background and culture, became and continue to be minorities, even in Palermo, where the Mauritian community has reproduced through religious expressions the distinctions of Indo-Mauritian groups that colonialism contributed to forming.

### **Public and Private Daily Practices. Between Persistence and Innovation**

The traditional theoretical model on the assimilation of immigrants, hypothesized in the Chicago School in the last century (Gordon 1964), seems to express a certain relevance in the present research in which assimilation oscillates between persistence and innovation of the origin's culture of immigrants. In Palermo, data show how assimilation oscillates between attitudes of rejection of the "new culture" and of defense of that of origin. This happens through practices whose expression changes in the public and private sphere. Although the interviews bring back differences of individual experiences, the analysis made it possible to grasp in the different ethnic groups trends of the analyzed practices.

About the adaptation processes, in the analysis, immigrants tend to homogenize on two conceptual poles: an innovative type in which the adaptation consists in the innovation of values, religious practices, clothing, food, et cetera, having incorporated in their cultural sphere new features, harmonizing them with the traditional, with obvious contradictions, but not rejecting them or abandoning them altogether. The second category identifies those who

continue through persistence practices to preserve on foreign soil the cultural origin elements.

Summarily, in the first category, are more present male immigrants of Islamic faith, and long residence Hindu. Among the innovative, the younger immigrants of Sub-Saharan African origin and the Tunisian ones are the most active. The level of education and their inclusion in educational and professional circuits seems to characterize the changes in the *innovatives*. In reality, the difference between the innovative and the retentionist is played on the dimensions of the public-private. In general, those who have an active social role in public tend to greater innovation. In contrast to individuals who instead concentrate the expression of identity in the private and tend to conservation. The hypothesis is that immigrants adapt identity conservation modes when “forced” by the public visibility to distinguish themselves, and be recognized, mainly by their own community.

Research data suggest a kind of multiculturalism in which the identity expressions of communities do not protect the interior space, the one in which a culture is perceived as a homogeneous and pure, but rather they intervene on the intermediate border areas, where, according to Appadurai (2001), the supplement experience is a surplus of meaning. The analyzed interviews explain the methods for adaptation of immigrants, through the adaptation of behavior patterns, roles, power, clothing, Italian culture, and in several cases, more properly those of Palermo.

Mauritian man, 50, Hindu: I called my son Giuseppe; I called him with an Italian name because if we had

given him a typical name of Maurizie, definitely he would not have felt a Palermitan and perhaps it would have also been discriminated because it's strange. Here I and my family eat the beef and then do not follow much the prohibitions that the Hindu religion preaches. Since I came here I learned and I realized that there must be equality between men and women.

The Muslim and Hindu immigrants in the private sphere shall implement conservation in practices of their cultural identity by food, clothing, religious practices. Among these communities, immigrants seem to be adapting conservative identity modalities when “forced” by the visibility in public to be distinguished and recognized, primarily by their own community. If the public dimension of religious differences did not emerge as an identity marker, it does not emerge nor even the difference *tout court* as an evocative political value of a comparison (or antagonism) to be composed on a cultural level. In Palermo, the conservation of foreign culture is exercised in cramped places, precarious, and remedied with difficulty, which become places of worship, schools, and culture of origin. As did the Tamil who teach the *Bharata Natyam* to girls, their typical dance. The Tamil community in Palermo has founded three of their dance schools in which lessons are held in the Tamil language, so that little girls learn the language that they do not know or are likely to lose because they were born elsewhere.

The teacher: In this dance and music, there is much of our culture and our history. So it is important that here, in Palermo, the Tamil girls approach this dis-

cipline. During the lessons I talk and explain everything in Tamil, so that children learn the language they do not know or they risk losing.

In the case of other ethnic groups of Southeast Asia, the maintenance of original language, and the habit to not speak Italian at home, should not be considered as an adaptation refusal, but as an essential requirement for maintaining family relationships and to conduct family practices “in the same language as always.” The language of the traditions undergoes, on the one hand, the strength of what the older generations know and intend to hand down, or at least maintain. On the other hand, the opposition of new generations more willing to reinterpret traditional cultural expressions through modalities closer to adaptation. As in the case of food with traditional dishes with the addition or substitution with local ones.

Senegalese woman, 36, chef: The main dish in my country is rice with meat or fish. My son, however, prefers pasta to rice. Eats it every day at school like all other children.

An identity marker of differentiation is the traditional clothing, used only for religious ceremonies or civil feasts of the country of origin. Considerable differences in behaviors were noted among men and women of the Muslim faith. The latter are more oriented to compliance with cultural traditions and especially of their social role in public.

Muslim Tunisian woman, 45: I do not wear the veil neither here nor in Tunisia. I do not wear it by choice. You feel the need to wear the veil perhaps when

getting on in years, because being a mother, grandmother, aunt, you never have to attract anyone, and the veil gives you composure, discretion. When I go to the mosque, I never put perfume because it attracts the attention of men, although men are put forward, the smell in the air expands. When I go there, I wear a suitable gown, non-adherent. The shapes of the body not to be seen. Prayer is a sacred moment and sin is always present. For this reason, women pray behind the men, because seeing a woman on her knees bent is not indicated at the time of prayer.

The resistance to assimilation, in the context of the research, has not produced in immigrant communities identity claims to protect at all costs their identity through ethnic pride events. A differentiation identity marker is the traditional clothing worn only during religious ceremonies or civil celebrations of the origin country. Considerable differences in behaviors were detected among men and women of the Muslim faith. The latter are more oriented to respect cultural traditions and their social role in public.

Interviews indicate that in Palermo many immigrants fully realize their projects, respectively, in a medium span of time: they return home with money accumulated; in a brief span of time: transferring money to those who remained at home. The possession of the title of citizenship is irrelevant for immigrants when a residence permit will allow them to satisfy the reasons why they emigrated. This explains their disengagement in terms of sharing of social cohesion, including the adaptation of utilitarian daily practices, in which cultural and religious traits that are immanent in their homeland



are secularized. Cultural integration projections are instrumental to their needs.

Muslim Tunisian woman: When I needed the doctor, I had no problems. Even in hospitals. I have also been to the gynecologist; he was a man, for me it was not a problem. God gave intelligence to man to make us heal.

They do not advance requests in respect of their cultural precepts also because they have activated ethnic persistence practices in an atmosphere of great freedom of expression of differences. Thus, immigrants in Palermo live in a state of cultural contradiction, and, more importantly, of inertia in regards to the protection of their values.

In the perspective of the status passages, the passagee (in this case, the immigrant) may want to avoid completing his/her passage (towards a full integration) because he/she feels good within its status or because it is safer than it would be outside of it (Glaser and Strauss 1971). Therefore, the immigrant tries to slow down or reverse this process. In these cases, the practices of persistence and conservation of ethnic differences are configured as degrees of balancing the power of control between immigrants (passagee) and natives (agent).

### **Living the Islamic *Ummah*. Being *Dharma*. Super-Conformism, Ethnic Persistence**

The dynamic nature of culture and values, and their interweaving, reproduces and finds out points of contact with the social reality faced for the first time.

Culture and religious values guide individuals in shaping a sense of belonging to the community. The comparative focus on the Islamic *Umma* and Hindu *dharma* reveals how religion intervenes in assimilation processes weaving significant interactions with the host community, to the point that minorities reduce the self-perception of the minority.

*Ummah* is a common Arabic word meaning “people, group,” or “nation.” The concept of *Ummah* might seem to correspond to the western understanding of a nation, but there are important differences. In the Muslim way of thinking, the only *umma* that counts is the *Ummah Islamiyyah*, the Islamic Community, an entity that theoretically comprises all Muslims throughout the world, whatever their national origin.

In Italy, Islam is the second religion professed. Now Islam is an “immigrant” religion. In perspective, it will be a “resident” religion. Over the years, Islam will become a “transplanted” religion, not only because immigrants will continue to arrive, as for the second and third generations that are living and growing in Italy. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 in New York, a Western hostility towards Islam grew up. This hostility generated a defensive reaction in the Muslim immigrants regardless of ethnicity or origin, and strengthened their religious identity. The common experience of Islamophobia creates a unique suffering community that brings together the most ethnically disparate Muslim communities, creating in the public sphere hegemony, an assertive political Muslim identity (Birt 2009). The traditions and values of origin for Muslim immigrants are not an obstacle to integra-

tion, but tensions in the effort to adaptation, including super-conformism and apparent contradictions, that evaporates when the family welfare becomes an element of self-realization and change of status. It is mostly Muslim residents for a long time in Palermo to be interested in these typically Western paths of upward social mobility.

Tunisian woman, Muslim, 42: In Italy, I am very well, no lack of work and one earns well compared to our country. We have managed to graduate our girls, to buy some apartment in Tunisia, that we rent as a bed & breakfast. My husband is a very traditional guy. He always decides what is to be done. In a few years we plan to go back to Tunisia, where we will be no more poor as in the past.

In studies of integration processes, the foundations of a transformation of European cities can be traced with characteristics of the medinas of the Arab world, more and more characterized by an Islam perceived by clothes, rituals, schools, foundations, places of worship. Europe would become, in this case, a transnational social space of a community that expatriates and recognizes oneself (Maréchal 2003).

Palermo is particularly welcoming for Muslims. In Palermo, there are five mosques, 4 of which are precarious spaces (basements, garages) independently managed and financed by the faithful. Muslim community is therefore very homogeneous from the ethnic and identity point of view. However, belonging to the same faith does not seem to be an integration factor among Muslim immigrants of different ethnicity. The attendance of the mosques of

Islamic faithful is divided by ethnicity. The “Grande Moschea” is attended almost exclusively by North Africans, while Muslim immigrants who come from sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia prefer other mosques, all located within the Historical Town. The same division happens for other religions: Orthodox, Hindu, Pentecostal, et cetera. North African immigrants are Muslims, Africans, Asians, and among them, even of different ethnicity, those who speak different languages and dialects. About the ethnic fragmentation of worship places, the most plausible explanation is that being often cramped places, these are unable to accommodate all the faithful who in fact are divided according to the proximity factor of identity and housing. An alternative hypothesis to the previous one is that the prejudice and the strategies of ethnic discrimination where “ethnic” criterion is the social category “discriminative” on which to base the hierarchical order in the arrival communities. In this case, it would tend to detract from or defame a group reputedly averse, to be banished, because of the competition for material and symbolic benefits through the development of distance and differentiation attitudes (Bourdieu 1983). The difference and the social distance that immigrants articulated in reference to religious practices and frequency, generate a state of disintegration among immigrants, not strictly religious, that accentuates the “ethnic” criterion as a social category “discriminative” to establish new identities on which to base the social order.

Hinduism is not just a religion, understood in the Western sense, related to dogma, church, clergy, divine revelation, but it is a set of beliefs, practices, cults, and rites that articulate all aspects of a man’s

life. For Hindus, *dharma* is a way of life in which the religious component is inseparable from the socio-cultural. It is a way of living and being in agreement with society and its culture. Into more orthodox Indian culture, the meaning of *dharma* is implicit in the word itself. *Dharma* (law, justice, duty) is the religion, the eternal immutable law, order, balance of creation, the moral law imprinted in the conscience of every individual to which the human being must conform. In the case of Hinduism, the identifying element is the *dharma*, which distinguishes Hindu from those who are not. *Dharma* is to the Hindu what makes a man a Hindu. Only those who were born on Indian soil are Hindu. Membership in the Hindu religion absorbs the class membership. From a sociological point of view, religious values are deeply nestled in social organization characterized by the respect of tradition that becomes a defensive instrument against the processes of transformation and gender inequality. In my analysis, for the individuals, Hindu of Tamil and Mauritian communities, the religious belonging and the collective identity reinforce each other. In these communities, the wish (or need) to develop and strengthen their own cultural identity emphasizes the religious dimension of membership.

The Sinhalese are mostly Buddhist, the rest Christians. Most of Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindu or Christians. In Sri Lanka, among Tamils and Sinhalese, there are many caste divisions as the effect of Hindu influence coming from the subcontinent. Castes are rigid and unchanging. The transition from one caste to another is virtually impossible. Emigration phenomena have mitigated the rigidity of the obligations connected to religion and the so-

cial order of caste. In the analysis of the interviews, it is evident how the concept of caste survives only in the memory of the adult generations. With emigration the need to adapt to any type of work has caused the break of the link between caste and job, flattening social distinctions. Only for the occasion of weddings a trace of social distinctions emerges, in those cases in which a young Hindu marries with a Hindu of different caste or a native Catholic. In these cases, marriage is not forbidden, but only hindered. This family organization is therefore guided by values which guide the actions of the subjects also in the wider society. Rather, they constitute an identity marker. This could hypothesize an essentialist vision of difference, in which individuals are unaware reproducers in traditions and rituals that postmodernity recedes to a frozen world, always equal to itself, while the rest of their world keeps running, but far.

Tamil woman, 22, Hindu: My family has been in Italy for over 20 years. In Palermo we feel perfectly integrated. I study at the university. I dress like Italian girls, but some traditions are unchanged. Last year my brother got married. My father addressed an intermediary who deals with combining marriages. He was looking for the best combination of people and families. We, Tamils, have a booklet of our profile that is done with the help of the stars. The intermediary with this booklet seeks the most suitable person, even with the economic level and the status of the families because we still have the castes that differentiate people.

When it comes to gender differences, in the context of origin, women tend to lean towards a natural "so-

briety" even in the private sphere. In public, they are careful with their behavior. They avoid showing off, attracting attention. Within the family, a woman is totally subordinated to her husband, her mother, and older sisters of her husband. Men are ascribed the tasks to provide for the family's livelihood, the household expenses, clothing for their wives and children. The freedom of the woman's spending is limited to food. Emigration has however diminished the rigor that characterized the status of women in the concept of *dharma*.

The hybridization and the religious syncretism phenomena represent the creative spirit that resides in every culture, activated by the need to redefine the inclusion or exclusion coordinates. As in the case of the Catholic Tamil community that in Palermo is protagonist of religious syncretism between the symbols of their culture and the local one. The syncretism process goes appropriating of practices and places dedicated to the cult of St. Rosalia patron saint of Palermo (such as the Feast, and the pilgrimage to the sanctuary). These dynamics have a strong impact in the identity—symbolic complex of natives who feel as stripped of a non-material identity resource that they must share in spite of themselves. The Hinduism of the communities from Sri Lanka and Mauritius found in Palermo a wide space for expression, in which it was created a syncretism of symbols and rites, aimed at maintaining the values and social organization of origin. A dedicated prayer space can be found in all of the homes, decorated with images of the gods of the Hindu pantheon, and with a place reserved for the image of St. Rosalia, venerated by Tamils for formal connections with an original cult

from the homeland. This led to the annexation of the saint into the Hindu pantheon. In short, the syncretism of the Hindu cult of St. Rosalia is a religious expression perpetrated into the logic of ethnic persistence. If the identity markers, such as religious ones, can be factors of social distance in host societies, a strong sense of religious belonging makes the elements of distinction more meaningful. Sometimes an immigrant community in the effort to accelerate the process of social integration in the new society goes to assume a more detached attitude towards cultural and religious traditions. This does not seem to occur in the Tamil community in Palermo. The saint is venerated devoutly according to the syncretism realized between the Christian religious cult and the Hindu one. The veneration of St. Rosalia tends to defeat the daily difficulties, and at the same time to re-establish the community's sense of identity. In conclusion, the syncretism of St. Rosalia is a coherent expression of patterns of action differentiated from the faith, but also chosen according to the aims of the people and within the environmental situations in which they live.

In conclusion, the two communities by pervading religious values in daily practices, apparently follow paths of integration in different ways. The Islamic community seems to swing between super-conformism and apparent contradictions. The Hinduist seems more oriented to ethnic persistence and to tradition.

In reality, the two paths are expressions of a differential adaptation expressed in some areas of life and not in others. The degree of difference is expressed



by different groups of immigrants when they use different tactics and different paths towards the integration. Even when religion is an essentialist factor of intense cultural and value alterity, however, it does not prevent integration.

### Cultural and Religious Practices: How Religion Changes the Face of Multiculturalism

Places of worship have a high symbolic identity value where membership is expressed and the community meets. It is the place where the biographical steps of the faithful are celebrated with rituals that combine the history, culture, and values of the community. The analysis of religious phenomenology in Palermo revealed that the difference and the social distance that immigrants articulate in religious practices generate a state of disintegration among immigrants. This difference, not strictly religious, accentuates the “ethnic” criterion as a “discriminating” social category to establish new identities on which to base the social order. Different ethnic groups with the same religion (e.g., Italian and Ghanaian evangelists) do not frequent the same places of worship because of the language of the rites. A casual observer will notice the alternation of families, groups, different crowds for clothing. These differences mainly concern sub-Saharan immigrants who wear clothes of their ethnic tradition at religious celebrations and when they meet on holidays with their countrymen.

Ghanaian man, 34, evangelist: I pray in an evangelist church that is frequented by people who come from different parts of the world and who speak different

languages. So we do the shifts. On the day of the ceremony, the morning is dedicated to the celebration in English. In the afternoon, instead, in French.

From a religious point of view, the most relevant change is the visibility of the religious expressions of the immigrant communities. These changes have a strong impact on the identity-symbolic complex of natives who must share them in spite of themselves. The problem will be increasingly important for the growth of the number of Catholics in the countries of Southeast Asia and Africa, that is, from the countries with the strongest emigration towards Italy and Palermo. In the future, we will have to imagine increasingly multi-ethnic, but also multilingual places of worship, attended by Ghanaian congregations at 8am, Tamil at 12, Rumanians at 5pm. The various dioceses will have to organize celebrations in different languages, with celebrants who know more than one language. In Palermo, younger immigrants tend to be more numerous than older residents. So, the newly established immigrant families will celebrate marriages and baptisms, but also confessions and funerals. In multiethnic Palermo, some parishes have already begun this path by granting spaces for the expression of cultural and religious differences. These possibilities assume significance of ethnic persistence, but also of integration to the territory and to the host community. So it happens that in the historic center the outdoor space of the parish of St. Clare, which also operates with cultural mediators, is enjoyed every Sunday by immigrants who gather to celebrate their holidays. Here the Ghanaian community, just as they do in the small villages of the African country, have symbolically elected a king and a queen. The *Ohemaa*

(the queen) and the *Ohene* (the king), who are real points of reference for the community. Like many of their countrymen, they do humble and poorly paid jobs, but on important occasions the king and the queen show off a lion’s skin on the naked back and a crown that make them protagonists.

Far from the Caribbean Notting Hill London, even in Palermo immigrants celebrate on the city streets. Already in September 2016, hundreds of Tamil immigrants celebrated the “Vinavakar Chathutdy,” an important Hindu festival, celebrating Ghanesha, one of the most loved deities of the community. The celebration was held inside one of the Hindu city temples, in a popular district of the city. For the first time, the city institutions were present (the Mayor, a Councilor). The streets were then populated by the faithful who marched through a procession of the chariot of divinity, through the streets of the neighborhood intrigued, including songs and traditional dances of the Tamil community. There are two elements to be emphasized. First: the public celebration in the same territory that the natives have always reserved for the procession of the Saint of the district. Second: the presence of the city institutions that has formally legitimized the freedom to express religious and cultural differences publicly. In the context of informal policies on integration in Palermo, for a sort of *par condicio*, even for other Islamic and Jewish religious ceremonies, they were celebrated in the presence of political institutions.

The spaces required by the community for the celebrations (and granted by the public administration) are public. On the occasion of the end of

Ramadan, the meeting of the Islamic faithful in the wide lawn of the “Foro Italico” is now customary. On this occasion, in the same place faithful of the three monotheistic religions gather in prayer.

### Conclusions

The research was focused on the relation between public expressions of cultural and religious differences of origin and local integration processes and the role of religion in the cultural identity processes of the societies; it had permitted to describe the mode of immigrant adaptation to the culture and everyday social practices with the local communities.

The analyzed data tend to qualify the religion for the immigrants: a) as a medium to transmit values and cultural elements that define the cultural heritage; b) as a spiritual, material, and social resource that intervenes at different stages of the migration process. In Palermo seems to emerge an integration framework in which, according to Gans (1992), immigrants tend to lean towards unprecedented forms of cultural adaptation, because they enjoy broad autonomy and freedom on the desire to access to the social practices and lifestyles of the Palermo community. In the case study presented, religion is not a factor of irreducible difference, but of spiritual refuge and identity protection, even if reshaped by assimilation. The analysis delineated the adaptation declinations through syncretism and cultural contagions. Immigrants, schematically divided between conservative and innovatives, participate in the construction of a local model of integration in which the typicality is characterized:

- a. by socio-political context, welcoming, which facilitates the integration process;
- b. by specific ways of adapting to different cultures. The product of the relationship between differentiation factors and local culture has highlighted specific characteristics on the social construction of everyday life and the links with the urban space, which seems partially free from the negative representations of the difference;
- c. by faster integration for freedom of expression of differences.

The identity expressions in the private tend instead to lean towards the conservation, even if between contradictions and ambiguities. The hypothesis is that immigrants adapt identity conservation modes when “forced” by the public visibility to distinguish themselves, and to be recognized, mainly by their own community. This condition, however, tends to compose oneself both through assimilation dynamics to the local culture, either through recovery strategies, preservation, and expression of differences of origin. In the framework of the status passages, the research seems to show that immigrants as passagee change their public role model when under pressure of adaptation to the local culture and lifestyle. The voluntariness (and therefore the desirability) of the status changes in immigrants is strongly dependent on the control actions of the agent. In this case, it depends on the degree of freedom that the native community grants for the expression of differences. The prevalent characteristic of the native community as “agent” is not of limitation or restriction, but tends to lean towards the indifference. Then, why do the

natives allow wide margins of freedom to the immigrants’ expressions of differences? My hypothesis is that in Palermo indigenous community does not have much to defend in economic terms. Indicators on quality of life are the lowest in Italy. The high percentage of overall unemployment and socio-economic hardship of large sections of local population have a low impact on discrimination practiced in the labor market. Discrepancies between immigrants and natives are minimal, and not likely to generate feelings of right to similarity nor the typical instances of relative deprivation in immigrants (Loch 2009). Moreover, the distance between citizens and institutions is unbridgeable, for the lack of trust that they inspire, especially at a local level. So on the social ladder many differences with immigrants are reduced. This nullifies the danger that the “immigrants” get access to resources (missing or absent). The “Us First,” trumpeted by the Northern Italian local subcultures, does not make sense in Palermo.

Finally, in the framework of the integration policies, the general theoretical elements that are deduced from the analysis reveal that the integration process comes close to segmented assimilation, in which immigrants are assimilated in some areas of life and not in others according to the model proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993) in which different groups of immigrants follow different paths towards non-assimilation through modes of preservation of their identity.

The tensions of adaptation are influenced by migration dynamics when in the same territory resident immigrants and newcomers coexist. In these cases, it determines a competition between cultural mi-

norities in which religion is a determining variable. As pointed out in other studies in Sicily (Ferrante 2011), the result is a push of newcomers to the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. In scenarios such as those described, religious affiliation also gains a renewed strength and legitimacy of the role of individual and social behavior.

The public dimension of religious differences does not emerge as an identity factor. It does not emerge even when the difference is an evocative political value of a comparison (or antagonism) to be composed on a cultural level. Immigrants themselves do not even invoke the tolerance that in other European countries minorities claim for the defense of cultural identity that they perceive as threatened. My hypothesis is that in Palermo immigrants act in a public sphere where the assimilation process has reshaped the cultural and religious differences, no longer connoted by their divergence from Western tradition. This does not mean that Palermo has realized a perfect integration. To be more accurate,

it means rather that in a socio-political climate of low pressure to integration, and in reality, instead of a place of substantial freedom of expression of differences, immigrants in Palermo do not need to claim their identity spaces.

You cannot impose a common identity shared by law, and even more in a coercive sense. When multiculturalism has encouraged ethnic minority groups to maintain and preserve their distinctive features, these groups have gone to the creation of parallel communities, but isolated and disinterested in the integration. A forced integration was established according to cultural patterns that do not belong to individuals, especially of immigrants. If they should enjoy greater freedom in expressing their “cultural” differences and qualifying their daily interactions, social or economic, in urban spaces, as evidenced from the research data in Palermo, probably they would spontaneously start an integration process more fluidly, not tied to negative representations of the difference.

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