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# The Tradition of *Segnature*. Underground Indigenous Practices in Italy

ABSTRACT: From the *Janare* in Campania to the *Masche* in Piemonte, the Italian regions have a long history of local healers and folk witches, also known as *Segnatori*. Shrouded in folklore and secrecy, these traditions are still alive and practised across the country, especially in the countryside. Data collected during two years of fieldwork between 2016 and 2018 suggest that the sole way to engage with these local healers is through either being part of the community or their family. There is also a firm reticence on the part of the witches and their community members to talk about the practice and the rituals involved. By analysing how folk magic has been concealed within and reshaped by the boundaries dictated by the dominant religious system and the cultural framework, I will argue that this practice is ingrained in the life of local Italian communities, somehow framing the way people explain their sense of religiosity or lack thereof. The matter of an evolving syncretism – from Catholicism to Paganism - will also be addressed as a key element to confirm the resilience of such traditions. Lastly, I will analyse the significance of their enduring core for the conceptualisation of magic found in the cultural fabric.

KEYWORDS: Segnature, Segnatori, Folk Magic, Italy, Indigenous, Shamanism, Magic, Witchcraft, contemporary.

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### *Introduction and methodology*

Findings derived from data collected during three years of research and fieldwork in Italy between 2016 and 2019 suggest that there are underground indigenous practices that appear to be widespread and at the same time concealed in Italy. Thanks to interviews, a survey, participant observation, texts and material produced within the communities, I will be able to draw the contours of this set of practices and allow their strong commonalities to converge into a unified understanding. By analysing these folk magic practices, I will argue that they are all part of the same tradition for they share a common core in the use of *Segnature,* words of power and modes of initiation. I will then tackle the matter of how they are cohabitating, hidden in plain sight, with a dominant religion and a worldview that obstruct their very existence (Seppilli 1983, 4). The matter of syncretism will also be addressed, highlighting the stark change in syncretisation that occurred between the old generation, who merge these practices with Catholicism, and the new generation, more inclined towards Paganism. Lastly, I address the question regarding what the survival of such magical practices tells us about the contemporary society and how the enduring belief in magic reshapes the belief system of the analysed community.

It would be extremely difficult and beyond the scope of the present study to trace back the history of such practices. However it is interesting to point out that Carlo Ginzburg uncovered one such tradition dating back to the sixteenth century which he found to resemble a form of shamanism (Ginzburg 2013; Sato 2005). Ernesto De Martino, the twentieth century Italian ethnographer, also studied magic and its manifestations in the south of Italy (De Martino 1982, 2007, 2015).

In contemporary Italy, these traditions appear to be still widespread, not only in the South, but throughout the country and can be found with minor variations in every region (Bartolucci 2016; De Bernardi 2015; Magliocco 2009). Not only did they overcome the difficulties generated by a disagreeing Catholicism but also defined or redefined the belief system for those who acknowledge their existence.

Despite having a strong common core, said practices are not unified under any common label but rather characterised as a set of heterogenous rituals to which mainly outsiders try to attribute a name. Upon analysing the data collected, I concluded that there is a propensity in the community towards the understanding of such practices as part of one folklore. Following this trend and attempting to foster a better understanding as well as a re-evaluation of a set of practices now relegated to the realm of superstition, I will systematise them under the label of *Tradition of Segnature*.

### *The role of Labels in Heterogenous Contemporary Traditions*

Folk magic in Italy has been long concealed from public acknowledgement and yet it appears to be widespread throughout the country. A survey[1] conducted in September 2018 with one hundred respondents, revealed that more than 80% have had a direct or indirect experience with vernacular healers, meaning that they had been either healed themselves or somebody close to them has sought help for some form of illness.

Vernacular healers elude the use of labels; it is up to those who recognise their role to try and categorise them. People usually identify them with specific names, often related to the local folklore and with variations from region to region. Thus, there are *Janare* in Campania or *Masca* (female) and *Mascun* (male) in Piemonte and even *Maggiara* in Sicily. These terms are usually linked to a certain lore which does not usually depict said figures in a good light (Natale 1829, 76).

As an example, I will tackle the *Janare* in the Campania region. The etymology of the word *Janara* is unclear but it is believed to have its roots in the latin *Ianua* (door) or *Dianara*, which means follower of the goddess Diana (Piedimonte 2016, 18). There are a lot of stories surrounding the Janare, the most famous of which was located in the city of Benevento, also known as the 'city of witches' for the age-old lore that surrounds the city (Borgia 1763, 212). The *Janare* are believed to commune with the devil from whom they draw the power of life and death. Legends suggest that during the Sabba (also known as Sabbaths) these witches would anoint themselves with a specific ointment that would allow them to "fly" to the sacred walnut where they would gather with the other witches and dance with the devil himself (Piedimonte 2016, 125). The incantation chanted while using the ointment was as follows:

| **Italian** | **English translation** |
|---|---|
| Unguento unguento | Ointment Ointment |
| portami al noce di Benevento | Bring me to the Benevento's Walnut |
| sopra l'acqua e sopra il vento | Over rain and over wind |
| e sopra ogni altro maltempo | And over every bad weather |

1 The survey is entitled 'Shamanism in Italy' and counts, as of April 2019, 99 respondents. The referred question was 'Are you aware of any forms of Folk Magic on the Italian territory (e.g. a relative or friend who has had the Evil Eye removed or someone you know - yourself included - who received the Segnature, healings, divinations, etc?' The three offered answers were 'yes', 'no', and '(yes) Please, tell your experience'. 85%of respondents chose the affirmative answers.

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As this brief overview of the legend surrounding the Janare suggests, these would not be characters with whom you would like to be associated, for they are rooted in the popular imagination with a negative and harmful connotation. According to my informants from Campania, *Janare* are not the evil witches depicted in spooky stories, but mostly healers and midwives that help people in their local community.[2]

Celeste B,[3] a young woman initiated by her grandmother, explained to me during an interview that culturally the vernacular healers in Campania are associated with the *Janare* but no healer would identify as one. She was very open in saying that her grandmother was well versed both in rituals to remove and cast the evil eye (*malocchio*) but she was very reserved and did not reveal her 'power' to people outside the family as talking about it might lead to losing that power.[4]

Thus, *Janara* is interchangeable with *witch* and both words are culturally used to recognise the vernacular witches in the Campania region. As categories for a broad understanding, these labels are applied but they would not be used to address the individual who performs such rituals. This is due to the negative connotation compounded over the centuries and because the healers prefer to keep their practice secretive. Only if you are a member of the community, or trusted by one of them, would it be possible to acknowledge their existence. As Celeste said, you would not say, 'There is a witch in X town who can help' or 'We have a *Janara* that removes the *malocchio*'. The advice would rather be phrased as, 'There's a woman in X town who helps people with Y problem'. When the real individual comes into the picture, all labels are removed and only their actions for the community are spoken of. As Sabina Magliocco states,

> The word *Strega* (witch) was never used in reference to these practitioners, except to insult them. They were known as *curator/curatrici* (curers), *guaritori/guaritrici* (healers), or simply as *praticos* ('knowledgeable ones'), akin to the English cunning-folk (Magliocco 2004, 162).

A similar pattern is to be found across the country in regards to traditional vernacular witches. A more recent tendency, fostered by the spreading of

[2] In my research, I have also collected testimonies affirming the existence of certain witches whose craft almost exclusively consists of casting curses on their enemies or on the enemies of people seeking their aid. Such accounts emerged from interviewing Franco from Benevento as well as from casual conversations in the provinces of Naples, Benevento and Avellino. However, this kind of witchcraft appears to be a minority compared to the practice of healers and will not be the subject of the present study.

[3] The real names are hidden behind pseudonyms to preserve the informants' privacy.

[4] More on this topic will be addressed in the following sections.

neo-paganism shows an increasing inclination towards self-defining as witches, in folk traditions as well as in new religious movements. Paganism and Wicca have fostered an active battle for the reclamation of their religious identity and the related magical practices, which entail the acknowledgment that negative connotations associated with witchcraft are to be abandoned. This process of re-evaluation may be helped by systematising this heterogenous tradition under a common label, for when there is a name an identity follows and only identities can gain the related rights.

An illuminating description of the role played by certain labels was offered by Vanth Spirit Walker, president of Pagan Pride Italia, during an interview. Vanth explained that,

> The concept 'pagan' only makes sense in reference to civil rights rather than from a spiritual point of view. The reason being that such a term stems from defining what you are not rather than what you are. It merely says that you are not a Christian. Even the Parliament of World's Religions is now adopting the definition Indigenous European Spirituality.[5]

According to the president of Pagan Pride Italia, albeit that the term Pagan does not comprehensively define your spiritual identity and what your personal practice involves, the very existence of this label is beneficial to the community and it is helpful for people to identify as such for the social implications of acknowledgment and the consequent entitlement to rights reserved for a spiritual/religious group.

This process of identification under a common label occurred for Italian Pagans in the early 2000s (Howell Ciancimino 2008), and is still ongoing for the vernacular witches. Such process has been confirmed by several interviews. Interestingly, Paola from Messina in Sicily has reported that the term *Segnature* was not in use in Sicily decades ago but it is becoming more known now thanks to the internet and the need of people from all over the country to understand the subject matter through the use of a common term.

Following and fostering an existing trend within the community, my research aims at helping this process of systematisation by gathering under

[5] From an interview transcription, 'il concetto di pagano ha solo un senso da un punto di vista di diritti civili e non da un punto di vista spirituale perché è un termine che nasce per assenza, per dire cosa non sei e non cosa sei. Nasce per dire che non sei Cristiano. Anche il Parliament of world religions ormai utilizza il termine "Spiritualità indigene dell'Europa e della mezzaluna fertile o loro riattualizzazioni o rivisitazioni moderne."' All English translations are mine.

a significant label the common and yet varied manifestations of what appears to be a uniform tradition.

### *The Tradition of Segnature*

*Segnatura* (singular) or *Segnature* (plural) literally mean 'Signs, gestures' and refers to the symbols drawn by hands along with words of power by the *Segnatore* (singular) *Segnatori* (plural), the performer of such gestures (Bartolucci 2016, 18).

In literature, this label has been used mainly in reference to the region Emilia Romagna (De Bernardi, 2015) for it is mostly in that region that the term is used to refer to their local witches. Differently from other regional definitions, such as *Maggiari* in Sicily or *Masche* in Piemonte, the label used in Emilia Romagna appears to be the most representative of the Italian folk tradition as a whole. This is due to the *Segnature* being the common denominator found across different regions. The act of drawing symbols, usually crosses, over the ill part of the body or over oil and water to remove the evil eye, seems to be the core practice that designates the healing performance.

The practice of *Segnature* appears to have a very long history in Italy, difficult to trace back with accuracy. According to what my informants claim, these practices may stretch back to the 1800s, although there is no clear evidence of such a claim in history or academic literature. Certainly, a feature of this tradition which makes it difficult to study and date with precision is the secrecy employed by those directly or indirectly involved with it. The reasons encouraging such behaviour lie in the conflict with Catholicism (addressed in more detail below) and social ostracism exerted by the current worldview and by representatives of the medical community (Seppilli 1983).

The role of a Segnatore is that of a healer and protector of the community. There is no evidence that they actively opposed their role to traditional medicine and have rather demonstrated cooperation with it (De Bernardi 2015, 9). An informant from San Potito Sannitico, in Campania region, shared with me during a *sagra*[6] the story of the town healer who used to live there and help people with illnesses, evil eye and other issues. Despite the fact that he was cooperative with the local doctor, the latter reported the healer to the authorities and sued him for practising medicine without proper training. The informant said that the healer decided to move out of the country and that they had never had any doctor as talented in

[6] A *sagra* is a rural festival held in the open, centred around culinary specialities typical of the season and the geographical place, accompanied by folk music and social games. These are very common in Italy, especially over summer and in the countryside.

curing illnesses ever since. Since this incident happened decades ago, I asked whether they had had another town healer. To this question, the informant gave a glance to his wife, who shook her head as for preventing him from replying, and then he looked back at me confessing that, no, they never had another healer ever since. This report is only one example of the ongoing conflict between vernacular healers and trained doctors, a sound motive to keep quiet about it.

Overcoming the reticence to speak was the main difficulty I encountered during my research. When introducing myself as a researcher, a preconception emerged that I was there as a judge, possibly siding with the scientific community. My fieldwork proved that the best way to find informants and gather data was to create a network of contacts based on trust. I worked my way in through close friends and family members first and then I would get a "reference" and be directed to other practitioners, being introduced as a trustworthy person who deserved to get an interview. In addition, thanks to the increasing knowledge sharing through social media, there are more online groups that under the label 'Segnature' are dispensing experiences and rituals of folk magic. Facebook seems to be the social media hosting most of these online groups, possibly because Facebook represents the most used gathering platform in Italy across different age groups (Fattori 2014, 20–40). Through the analysis of the most popular of these folk magic groups, we can gather relevant data to understand the contemporary evolution of this tradition.

There are three popular groups[7] who use 'Segnature' in their name, two of which count almost three thousand members whilst the third amounts to about two thousand. These groups show a similar dynamic of sharing with other members the local rituals found across the country. The first contribution that these online groups have produced for the communities is the use of a shared language to describe their practices. As I mentioned, the name '*Segnature*' has been long used in Emilia Romagna in reference to the gestures and words of power used during rituals. In other regions, even though these gestures and words are still performed with minor variations, they seemed to remain nameless in most cases. Now that thousands of practitioners or seekers are gathered from different areas, the need for a shared language emerged and the term 'Segnature' has become increasingly understood and adopted in different areas in the North and the South.

In all these Facebook groups, the majority of members share their physical or mental health issues or those of family members and friends. There is a core of *Segnatori*, usually administrators of the groups, that will accept or reject the requests made by individuals. When one of the healers steps forward to help, the person in need is asked to send a private message

[7] Listed from the most populated: 'Segnature sacre e profane', 'Le segnature di zia Checchina', 'segnature, esorcismi e benedizioni'.

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with name, date of birth and a photo of the patient. Another common activity is the sharing of *Segnature*. Traditionally every lineage has one or two main illnesses they are able to cure but, thanks to these groups, those who possess *Segnature* to heal a headache can exchange their knowledge with those who know how to treat a sprain. Such alteration of a tradition has led to an extension of the abilities that every healer possesses.

### *The Generational Gap*

The Tradition of *Segnature* presents a significant disparity in its manifestatio, between what I will call the 'new generation' and the 'old generation'. A generational gap has already been evidenced, with some variations, in a previous research (De Bernardi 2015, 139–149). In De Bernardi's study, it is explained that *Segnatori* over the age of 40 tend to follow what they had been taught to the letter, without questioning or wondering what the reasons for performing a practice in a specific way might be. Conversely, younger individuals are more eclectic and 'personalise' the practice, trying to find meaning in the ritualism they had been taught.

To convey the differences that emerged from my data, I will categorise the two compared generations in a different fashion. By 'old generation', I mean practitioners roughly over the age of 60 and/or dwellers of the countryside. It encompasses people who had never shared their practice through social media or put it in the public domain. This generation is characterised more by the secretiveness associated with their practice rather than their biological age, though it so happens that such a reserved approach is mostly endorsed by those in an older age range. 'New generation' will refer to people below the age of 60 and/or dwellers of medium sized to big cities. Compared to the old generation, they are defined by the openness whereby they share their practice and the use of social media or social gathering to share experiences and information.

A representative of the old generation is typically the town healer that everyone in the community acknowledges as the person you would go to when conventional medicine fails, in some cases even as a first choice. The healers often live in secluded areas and lead simple and private lives. Their ability to heal has been passed on from a close relative (usually from the grandmother) in a ritual that has to be performed in the period between the sunset of the 24th of December and the sunrise on the 25th, most commonly around midnight. From that moment onwards, they know the gestures and how to perform them and they know the words of power to chant while doing the *Segnature*. Traditionally, only a blood relative can

'receive the *Segnature'* and only one member of the family can be initiated. The different rituals are performed using the local dialect and include syncretic elements with figures worshipped in the Catholic faith, especially through the use of incantations which include references to the holy trinity and the saints.

The new generation typically shows an open and syncretic approach. They tend to mix aspects of the tradition with newer interpretations. Also, whilst in some cases there is still a syncretism with Catholicism, there is an increasing incorporation of Pagan traditions. For instance, some will still perform initiations on Christmas eve but not only with family members but rather with members of the group they lead. In some other cases, as Federica explained during an interview, they move the initiation date to the Winter Solstice to better suit their Pagan belief system. Another interesting discrepancy is the extension of the *Segnature*'s field of action. Whilst the old generation only used them for traditional purposes (healing herpes, falls, sprains, loss of objects and alteration of the weather), the newer generation is incorporating, in some cases creating, *Segnature* to address newer necessities, such as anxiety or fear.

Another difference between old and new generations is that according to the tradition every healer only has the power to cure one or a set of illnesses whereas the new generation, more eclectic in nature, believes that it is possible to learn the *Segnature* for every issue, provided someone who has that knowledge shares it with you. This extension of the number of illnesses that can be cured is accompanied by a geographical extension of the healing performance itself. For the new generation it is not necessary to heal in person but they can now heal at a distance, ritualising over a photo of the person and/or the body part in need of healing sent via private message on Facebook or WhatsApp (Bartolucci 2016, 52). One last variation from the dictates of the tradition, is the initiation process performed at a distance and using social media platforms. In this case, there is an interesting syncretism of traditional elements and newer additions. As per tradition, the initiation (otherwise known as the 'Passage of *Segnature'*) happens at midnight preceding Christmas day. The Initiatory procedures and the *Segnature* are uploaded at midnight and removed after a few hours. Everything described needs to be performed in those hours as that is considered to be the time when the embodiment of those abilities can occur.

### *Types of Rituals and Initiations*

There are a considerable number of health issues that can be cured by the *Segnature*. The most traditional are: herpes, falls, sprains, loss of objects, evil eye removal and alteration of the weather. Although, as previously mentioned, the field of action of the *Segnature* has expanded.

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The relation between the *Segnatore* and the person in need of help starts with a disease or an issue that the local healer is able to treat. It is most common to seek help from a medical doctor first and in the big cities this might also be the only option. In the countryside, however, there are towns where it is actually more common to seek help from a *Segnatore* rather than from the conventional medicine. This happens especially when the specific Segnatore has built a good reputation and he or she is well trusted by the community. Also, a situation of this sort can occur when the person has lost trust in conventional medicine or has tried that route without getting the hoped outcome.

Once the person has decided to get this sort of treatment, they would contact the Segnatore and set up a meeting. During the first meeting, the Segnatore can decide to accept, decline or refer the person to someone else with more experience or a specific expertise on the illness.

Depending on the region, the *Segnature* can be performed in different ways. The gestures performed are mostly crosses, drawn on the body part that needs treatment, in a number dependant on the condition and, usually, in a multiple of the number three or in a repeated fashion from the beginning until the end of the chanted prayer. These crosses can be drawn on the body directly with the fingers or accompanied by the use of an oil. While the Segnature are performed, secret words are pronounced, often in an internalised manner so that the patient would not be able to hear them. These words are considered sacred and are passed on through the initiation process and hence cannot be revealed to another nor can they be written on paper to aid the initiate's memory. Those words are repeated numerous times during the Initiation until the neophyte healer has memorised them properly.

The force or energy that allows a Segnatore to heal is often called *Il Potere* ('the power') by the vast majority of interviewees. Where this power comes from is most times not questioned by the old generation and interpreted in different ways according to the personal belief system by the new generation of *Segnatori*. This power is transmitted through initiation and seems to be linked with the secrecy of their practice. According to practitioners from the old generation, if you brag about your power or reveal it to others, you will lose it. The *Segnatore* is only allowed to disclose their ability if there is a purpose, such as a person in need of help. Most members of the new generations do not endorse this belief and it appears to be slowly disappearing from the belief system of younger practitioners.

The healers can be both males and females. The matter of gender presents variations from region to region depending on whether the interviewee belongs to the old or the new generation of *Segnatori*. For instance, most members of the old generation believe that if you are a female you can only initiate a female whereas I have collected accounts from

female members of the new generation who have gladly initiated men. Even so, the *Segnatori* still largely seem to be women. This might be related to the role of women in society, the supposed connection that women have to their body and the bodies of others might allow a preferential access to the mysteries leading to healing (De Bernardi 2015, 2).

The method of compensation in the Tradition of *Segnature* appears to be rather consistent across different regions as well as between the two compared generations. All my informants uphold the idea that the healer must not ask for money, although some form of spontaneous recompense is deemed desirable by some and necessary by most. As Bartolucci clarifies,

> The patient must make an offer, in cash or in kind, even derisory, and therefore symbolic, to the healer, who cannot refuse to accept but cannot even request it. The reason for this offer, as explained both by the patients and by the interviewed healers, is based on the certainty that, without it, the *Segnature* cannot have the desired outcome, that is, it is not complete (2016, 76).[8]

Interviewing Paola and Mariachiara, two Sicilian women who received the ability to perform Segnature from the well-known Zia Checchina[9] from Milazzo, provided a significant account on the matter. Paola stated that Zia Checchina 'had a spirit' that told her to never take money for the help she gave to people. So, when somebody gave her a gift in the form of goods or food she would accept whereas when they tried to repay her with money she would immediately go to the church and donate it to a charitable cause. None of the interviewees knew the reason for this deontological rule, just that this is what 'the spirit' told her and that is what she did. After all, Zia Checcina used to tell Paola, 'If you don't do it from your heart, it is going to damage yourself and the other'.[10] That is what Zia Checchina used to say as a warning and an encouragement. Not to receive money nor gratitude but to serve.

### *Relation to the dominant religious system*

Italians' lives have been affected by the Catholic religion for centuries (Garelli 2007). Yet, in more recent times and with the decline of interest on

[8] 'Il paziente deve fare un'offerta, in denaro o in natura, anche irrisoria, quindi simbolica, al guaritore, il quale non può rifiutarsi dall'accettare, ma non può neppure richiederla. Il motivo di questa offerta, come viene spiegato sia dai pazienti che dai guaritori intervistati, poggia sulla certezza che, senza di essa, la segnatura, non può avere l'esito sperato, cioè non è completa."

[9] It could be translated as 'Aunt Francesca'. In Italy, it is common to address a person close to you or a benefactor as 'uncle' or 'aunt', even when there is no blood relation.

[10] 'Se non lo fai col cuore, fa male sia a te che all'altro'.

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the part of young people, scholars have wondered whether Italians can still be regarded as Catholics. Enzo Pace adopts Benedetto Croce's viewpoint in affirming that Italians cannot see themselves as other than Catholics because they cannot envision themselves outside the socio-cultural boundaries defined by a long history of Catholicism (Pace 1996, 389).

Folk magic traditions also seem to have been part of the social fabric for longer than we can trace, despite being in opposition to what the Church deems acceptable for someone who identifies as a Catholic. The main position taken by representatives of the Catholic Church is that magic stems from the desire to gain superhuman powers, which are abilities reserved to God. As a consequence, all practices related to magic, including horoscopes and fortune telling, will make people deviate from their religious path (Pasqua 2007, 26–28).

In an article in the famous journal *Famiglia cristiana* ('Christian family') the popular use of elements linked to the Catholic beliefs for magical puiposes, such as a home blessing with holy water to remove negativity, it is made very clear that no such things exist and that nobody should believe themselves able to perform any form of magic because even the most benign would entail some sort of communion with the devil.

> The "pagan" who is always latent in each of us, in the face of the adversities of everyday life, tends to discharge the responsibilities on uncontrollable hidden forces and to solve problems through the illusory shortcut of "magic" rather than with personal commitment [to faith]. It is the ancient temptation described in the Genesis where we tend to transfer the disastrous consequences of our own claim to be like God on the snake. This world is not the kingdom of Satan, let alone other unidentified negative forces. There are no "cursed places". We are the ones who, with our wickedness, allow the evil one to be present and active, making this world "hellish" (Rizzolo 2010).

Nonetheless, there are priests and ordained members of the Church that perform rituals to ward off evil forces such as demons. The most renowned example is that of Gabriele Amorth, best known as Padre Amorth, a famous priest who has allegedly performed over 160,000 exorcisms in his lifetime. Padre Amorth has also declared in numerous interviews that what drives the exorcism is the power of faith and hence it is the intercession of God that makes the ritual effective (Tosatti and Amorth 2010; Amorth and Rodari 2012). Although framed within a Catholic worldview, these practices still appear somewhat "magical" to the average Italian, so much so that most of my Catholic informants who perform the *Segnature* use exorcisms and other "miracles" performed by members of the Church as examples of magical practices that are Catholic in nature.

An interpretation of this phenomenon is provided by De Martino. Citing Theodor Trede (1899, 321–339) and his research on religious and social life in the reign of Naples, he concluded that it was not Catholicism that won against Paganism but rather the other way around. Pagan traditions and beliefs have survived and are now just masked under a different label (De Martino 1982, 124). De Martino then continues to explain these folk traditions, often labelled as superstitions, as not to be found exclusively in Naples but everywhere in Italy. Consequently, what happens is a syncretisation of Catholicism and Paganism where the one provides the theoretical framework and the other the applied interpretation affecting daily life.

An example of such syncretism is found in the conceptualisation and practices surrounding the saints. According to Sallmann, the Church itself has increasingly empowered, from a spiritual point of view, the worship of saints and what the testimonies collected suggest is that saints are perceived as the keepers of balance within a community that might be threatened by adversities of different nature. The saint is believed to possess powers that affect the natural order; a saint can calm a storm at sea and help stricken ships. He or she can induce or dissipate rain if needed and foretell the future. But what all saints are best known for and are most worshipped for is their ability to heal illnesses, to the point where their importance is proportional to the efficacy shown on such matter (Sallmann 1979, 593). Since saints operate within a Catholic theoretical framework and still perform "magic" in the form of miracles, they represent the best role models for vernacular healers, who believe that by using Catholic symbols (the cross) and prayers while performing their rituals, they are doing nothing that would be considered in opposition to their identity as Catholics.

Luca Trombetta, in the attempt to analyse the discrepancy between what the Catholic Church says and what Catholics actually do, explores what he calls the 'Post-modern condition,' which opens the individual to the possibility of a religious experience not dictated by institutions, for there is an increasing acknowledgement of the radical limitations of both language and rational understanding. This makes Trombetta wonder whether we are facing an 'epistemological rupture' in a Foucauldian sense, where a new relation between words and things would not allow us to draw conclusions that were once considered the only consistent inference (Trombetta 2004, 8–12).

If this is the case here, such disruption has begun long before post-modernism and perhaps the advent of such a paradigm has rather allowed the emergence of occurrences that were once concealed because they were deemed unacceptable. Now the matter of acceptance has met the post-modern fluidity between theory and practice that reshapes the way practitioners frame and interpret their practices.

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What emerged from my fieldwork and interviews is that all the *Segnatori* of the old generation are Catholics and do not perceive any discrepancy between their religious beliefs and practices. None of the interviewees showed any concern about it and most of them were actually surprised by my question. As for the *Segnatori* of the new generation, they tend to be either Catholic or Pagans or self-identify as 'spiritual'. None of the Catholic practitioners of the new generation conveyed that you need to be a Catholic to perform the Segnature. Yet, as Paola from Messina explained, it helps because the prayers and gestures are drawn from Catholicism. Nonetheless, if a non-believer feels comfortable using them she believes they would work just the same.

### *The Survival of Magic. Embedding illness into Myth*

Based on the tradition carried forward by the old generation, it is possible to identify three main realms under which the treatable illnesses fall: physical, psychical and environmental. Examples of issues related to the physical realm are shingles (called 'Sant Anthony's fire')[11] and lumbago ('the witch's hit').[12] To the psychical we can associate issues such as the sun stroke[13] and the removel of evil eye[14] whereas 'cutting the sea swirls'[15] may be related to the environmental realm.

In the Italian folk tradition some illnesses have a symbolic name, which often represents figuratively the effect produced on the body. All illnesses in contemporary Italy have names established by the medical community and yet those which are treatable with the *Segnature* appear to keep their symbolic descriptors. This discrepancy led me to investigate further what the reasons might be for the general population to hold on to a somewhat archaic way of labelling those specific diseases.

The first reason might be that those are common and age-old health issues, pre-dating a national health service only established in 1978 (Ascoli and Pavolini 2012). The absence of widespread access to medical help might have facilitated and even required the development of other forms of healing, especially in the countryside where access to physicians was even more difficult. From that initial need, the *Segnature* had developed and passed on cures from generation to generation because, according to my informants, 'they really do work, I've seen them work with my own eyes'.[16]

[11] 'Fuoco di Sant'Antonio'.
[12] 'Colpo della strega'.
[13] 'Colpo di sole'.
[14] 'Malocchio'.
[15] 'Tagliare le trombe del mare'.
[16] From an interview with Mariachiara G.

Secondly, to create a magical dimension that somehow overwrites the mundane framework, the disease itself needs to step into the "myth" and become part of that dimension. Mythologising the disease and allowing the latter to become part of a dimension where magic can and will happen, helps the healer and the healed to take part in a consistent narrative where a shift from the ordinary to a non-ordinary reality can happen.

This need to shift into a non-ordinary perception of the world is particularly relevant for a tradition that does not use other ritualistic techniques to enter such A state. In the rituals of the Tradition of *Segnature* there is no temple, no special gowns, no circle casting. Practitioners use daily tools often in the same place where they cook and eat dinner.

To better understand the manifestation of these magical practices, I will illustrate a typical *Malocchio* ritual as explained by Celeste B. during an interview. Celeste's family is originally from Ceppaloni, a town in the province of Benevento but she now lives and studies in Naples. She was initiated by her grandmother, who taught her how to remove the Evil Eye (*Malocchio*). Concerns such as a series of unfortunate events or a persistent headache are believed to be signs of someone casting the evil eye on you. As Celeste explained, it is not necessary to perform a ritual to cast the *Malocchio* on someone, as it is believed in the folklore that envy or other detrimental emotions towards a person are sufficient to exert their damaging power. Thus, the first part of the ritual will be a divination. The *Segnatore* will, in the person's presence, drip a few drops of extra virgin olive oil in some water that had been poured into a plate. If the oil dissolves in water the person is cursed whereas if oil and water remain separate no Evil Eye has been cast on the person (see Figure 1). As Celeste pointed out, 'It makes sense because the magical act that causes and reveals the existence of *Malocchio* is something out of the ordinary and it's not physically and chemically ordinary that oil dissolves into water whereas it is natural to have oil and water separated!'[17]

[17] 'che poi ha senso nel senso che l'atto magico che rivela l'occhio è qualcosa di fisicamente e chimicamente *out of the ordinary*. Cioè non è normale che l'olio si sciolga nell'acqua, invece è normale che l'olio si sciolga dentro l'acqua… e quindi uno dovrebbe avere sempre l'occhio'.

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Figure 1.

In cases where the *Malocchio* is confirmed, the *Segnature* will be performed in the form of crosses and prayers over the plate containing the dissolved oil. As this sample ritual shows, the ordinary world (a plate, cooking oil) is entangled with a non-ordinary interaction, yet no material setting outside of these objects was created to trigger this shift.

With such a setting to frame the ritual, the doubt arises as to what might distinguish the magical act from a mundane one; what separates the ordinary from non-ordinary living. According to how the tradition manifests and how rituals are performed, there seems to be no separation for the practitioners. As Fabrizio Ferrari explains in his work on De Martino,

> Magical practices are not extraordinary for those belonging to the cultural system that generates them. In fact, they are often not even considered magic at all (Ferrari 2012, p.78).

Whilst the new generation tends to engage more with a speculative understanding of the *Segnature* and why they work, the old generation performs them as ordinarily as following a recipe for a cake given by their grandmother. Since vernacular magic does not contemplate a stark separation between a magical and a non-magical world, the two become intertwined and cohabit in the overlapping of mythical guises upon the otherwise mundane elements of reality.

This absence of alterity between the magical and the mundane may be analysed by looking at Ernesto De Martino's investigation of magic and its role in the Italian society of the twentieth century. Magic for De Martino is not a feature of a pre-rational era, as it is depicted in James G. Frazer's 'Golden Bough' (Frazer 2001). Previous scholarship had, in fact, presented folk magical practices in Italy as residues of a pre-Christian and primitive

belief system on the edge of disappearance (Ferrari 2012, 78). In contrast to his predecessors, for De Martino magic constitutes an omnipresent element in human history, which constantly changes but never ceases to exist. As a historicist and Benedetto Croce's student (Croce 1948), De Martino interprets every element of human endeavours in relation to the historical moment of its manifestation. Thus, there is no peasant (*contadina*) culture beyond history and suspended in a mythical time as it is described in the works by Carlo Levi (Levi 2000), for every occurrence has to be interpreted as intertwined with its time and not as if it pertained to a legendary age outside of history.

Antonio Gramsci gives another interesting outlook on folk magic traditions and their relation to history. Sabina Magliocco explains that for Gramsci,

> Folklore was not a 'survival' that was quickly disappearing, but an integral part of the cultures of rural Italian peasants, and a product of particular historical and cultural circumstances, and worthy of study in its own right alongside literature and history (Magliocco 2004, 155).

Likewise, magic's effectiveness needs to be comprehended within the historical context. As De Martino suggests, magic represents a way to solve the 'crisis of presence' (*crisi della presenza*). This crisis occurs when the agency of the individual is threatened by a weakened subject-object dichotomy. Consequently, the subject (*soggetto*) goes from being the actor (*agente*) to being acted upon (*agito*), from intentional acting to 'intentioned' acting (*intenzionato*). The person is not the agent anymore but rather a world's echo (De Martino 2007, 74–75). According to Farnetti and Stewart,

> In the crisis of presence individuals experience "dehistorification." Since everything is historical, losing presence – being cut off from synthesizing process of historical becoming – is equivalent to losing history, or losing society […] Like cauterizing a wound, the resort to ritual (or "religious reintegration") exaggerates the initial crisis on the way to healing it. An unfortunate individual falling out of history is conscripted, through ritual, into a larger step out of history, which reopens the person to values, and enables the reacquisition of everyday historicity (Farnetti and Stewart 2012, 432).

Consequently, the role played by the magical world (*il mondo magico*) is not to understand or modify the surrounding world but to affirm its very existence (De Martino, 2012).

The survival of vernacular magic among Italian people appears then to be the product of history, fostered by two endemic driving forces within the cultural fabric: tradition (especially family tradition) and the rejection of

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authorities. Tradition leads to attributing value to everything 'ancient' and passed on through generations, which encompasses both the *Segnature* and the Catholic framework, whereas the rejection of authorities might be a clue to comprehend the reason as to why magic practitioners perceive no conflict between their practices and their identification as Catholics. Loose interpretations of dominant theoretical/religious frameworks appear therefore to be at the core of such practices' survival. Catholicism is incorporated by using the Trinity, the prayers and the saints in the rituals while the antagonism to the pervasive positivism that would portray magic as a mere delusion is resolved with a 'It's not true but I believe in it' (*Non è vero, ma ci credo*) (Magliocco 2012, 3–13). The latter justification is the most adopted response that an Italian would give you when questioned as to why they read horoscopes when none of that 'is real' or why they seek a tarot reading when 'such things do not really exist'. As Magliocco highlights,

> The enchanted worldview does not exist in isolation from dominant discourses. As Ernesto De Martino makes clear in *The Land of Remorse*, his epic study on tarantism, each successive layer of interpretation, from Christianity to Enlightenment paradigms, leaves a trace on magical traditions (Magliocco 2009, 111).

In conclusion, the Tradition of *Segnature* seems to be characterised by an ingrained fluidity, where labels exist but are not used, the relation between the theoretical and the practical is blurred and the religious affiliations are a matter of individual interpretation. The dimension these practices create eludes a structured grasp based on the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction while still evolving and getting reshaped by the new generation. In a framework where there is no distinction between a magical and a non-magical world, what endures is the practice itself; a set of rituals to help the community, whether it be made of two people or an entire region, regardless of it occurring in close proximity or at a distance, online or offline. 'Being of service' is what matters, Zia Checchina would say.

### *Concluding remarks*

To conclude the present study, I find it essential to clarify that research on the Tradition of *Segnature* is still ongoing and hence more data is being collected to further investigate and fully comprehend such practices. This article is the product of three years of field study and data collection but it is not exhaustive for more research is needed, both on my part and on the part those who would pursue this topic in the future, to improve scholarly understanding of a phenomenon the academic inquiry of which is still in its infancy.

Based on the current state of research, the data suggests that the commonalities between regional manifestations are remarkably stronger than their differences, which are mostly limited to the use of a local dialect for prayers and local terms for labelling. The ritual variations do not appear to be linked to regional belonging but most noticeably to the "generation" to which the practitioner can be associated. Consequently, I conclude that these practices can indeed be regarded as part of one consistent tradition.

I expect this tradition will evolve rather quickly and that a scholarly interest in the matter might foster such progression. From a socio-cultural point of view, vernacular healers are still seen as people acting out of delusion and victims of backward superstitious beliefs. This worldview, alongside the rejection from the Catholic Church, has kept practitioners 'in the closet' and led the wider population to either dismiss these practices or acknowledge (and utilise) them in secret. We can predict that academic interest and study of such displays of Italian folklore, free from religious or judgemental implications, might transcent social stigma to shed some light on a meaningful feature of the Italian culture.

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