

‘Con il volere di Dio’: Bernardo Provenzano and religious symbolic ritual

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This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to analyse the symbolic religious language utilised by mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano in his social interactions with the lower echelons of the Sicilian mafia. When Provenzano assumed control of Cosa Nostra in the 1990s, he inherited an organisation severely diminished by a decade of internal conflicts, violence and the arrest of numerous leaders. The article argues that religious performative behaviour and language were used by the mafia boss to establish his leadership over Cosa Nostra, reshape its internal structure, and thereby revitalise an organisation in apparent terminal decline.

Keywords: Bernardo Provenzano; mafia; Cosa Nostra; religion; pizzini (messages); performance; ritual; symbols; social drama; social interaction

Introduction

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing
but inwardly are ravenous wolves.
You will recognize them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:15–16)¹

The idea of a religious Cosa Nostra might seem to be a contradiction. Nonetheless, religious symbolism and behaviour are remarkably evident throughout the whole history of the mafia. Examples of the relationship between mafia and religion range from the initiation rituals where the candidates for affiliation swear blind obedience whilst smearing their blood over a sacred picture (Gambetta 1996, 262–70), to the traditionally prominent roles demanded by mafia leaders in religious processions (Dino 2008, 19–37) and the religious images and artefacts frequently found in the hideouts of mafiosi.

Religion, like the code of honour, appears to be a constant in the ‘transcultural’ (Santino 2006)² dimension of the mafia since its origins, yet it is only recently that the phenomenon has aroused academic interest. The relationship between the Sicilian mafia and religion has been approached from several different perspectives, ranging from descriptive chronicling of events linking mafia activities, religious practices and the Church’s position towards the phenomenon (Mignosi 1993; Ceruso 2007; Sales 2010) to more specialised theological analysis (Stabile 1992, 1996; Fasullo 1993; Naro 1994; Cavadi 2009). Other recent studies have begun to approach the topic from a socio-anthropological (Principato and Dino 1997; Dino 2008) and a psychological standpoint (Giordano 1999).

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Despite these different perspectives, the underlying interpretation is that of mafia religion as a self-serving value system that provides legitimisation to illegal behaviour and generates a sense of belonging and identity through a set of rules and practices derived from the Catholic tradition.

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to describe the role of religion in the micro-social dimension of interaction between mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano and the lower echelons of Cosa Nostra. In particular, it refers to socio-anthropological perspectives which emphasise the role of rituality and performativity in constituting social structure and identity, to describe the effects of Provenzano's religious behaviour and language on the rest of the organisation. Such an approach has potential utility in the study of the mafia transculture and it may provide a better understanding of the ability of Cosa Nostra to repeatedly adapt to changing times whilst maintaining consistent 'moral' codes and practices. The article argues that, through a ritual of social interaction imbued with symbolic religious references, Provenzano succeeded in mediating between rival mafia factions, gained their consensus, and eventually revitalised the structure of an organisation in evident terminal decline.

The rise to power of the Corleonesi

Bernardo Provenzano took control over Cosa Nostra from around 1995 until his arrest by the Italian police in April 2006. Prior to his arrest he had evaded capture for over 40 years. During this period, the Sicilian mafia witnessed the escalation of power of the Corleonese faction under Luciano Leggio and his *belve* (beasts), Totò 'shorty' Riina and Bernardo 'the tractor' Provenzano (Lodato 1999, 22–23).

Emerging victorious from the late 1950s war for control over Corleone, Luciano Leggio began to establish his roots in Palermo, historically the mafia's most powerful province. Indeed, the long-term tactic implemented by the Corleonesi consisted of acquiring power over other mafia 'families' (local mafia clans)³ and the *Commissione*, or *Cupola* – the representative instrument of the moderation and judicial system established around the 1950s to take decisions on important matters, settle internal disputes and prevent power from being accumulated by a few (Arlacchi 2000, 68–69).⁴

By the time Leggio became a member of the *Commissione* in 1970, he had already extended the influence of his faction into the economic and political life of Palermo, setting the stage for the Corleonesi to become the dominant clan in Sicily (Dickie 2004, 338–39). Over the years, the Corleonesi had progressively accumulated power and wealth on many levels: establishing influential political connections; investing the profits of illegal activities in the consolidation of their power within and outside the organisation; systematically using ruthless violence to demonstrate their military power. 'In a sense, the Corleonesi became within the body of Cosa Nostra what Cosa Nostra was within the body of Sicily: a secret and deadly parasite' (Dickie 2004, 333).

Some time after Leggio's arrest in 1974, Totò Riina, now with Provenzano as second in command, continued this strategy and waged war against the most prominent mafia 'families' of Palermo. The escalation of violence culminated in the early 1980s in the Second Mafia War, a period also known as *la mattanza* (the slaughter) for being one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of the Sicilian mafia (Dickie 2004, 367–75; Lucarelli 2004). Mafiosi on the losing side who survived the extermination decided to collaborate

with the Italian judicial system in return for reduced sentences and protection against the Corleonesi. Tommaso Buscetta's testimonies in 1984, followed by those of other *pentiti* (mafia defectors), provided the investigating judges not only with valuable insights into Cosa Nostra, but also with sufficient evidence to end the maxi-trial (1986–1987) with the conviction of several hundred mafiosi.⁵ Subsequently, stringent measures in the anti-mafia struggle were employed. Between 1992 and 1993, Cosa Nostra, still under Totò Riina's command, retaliated by launching a bombing campaign that killed 20 people including prominent anti-mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino.

This unprecedented attack by the criminal organisation caused a severe backlash from civil society, the State and the Church, which ended a long period of silence by openly taking a position against the mafia. Most importantly, the defectors' breach of the code of *omertà* (silence) helped the authorities establish beyond any doubt that the mafia really existed in the form of one united criminal organisation (Farrell 1997, 17; Lupo 2004, 314). It is worth noting that, until the early 1980s, the predominant paradigm was one of the mafia as a set of cultural behaviours, lacking any coherent, corporate structure (Farrell 1997, 17; Paoli 2003, 15).⁶ The mafia was interpreted as neither an organisation nor a secret society, but as a 'method' and an 'attitude' inextricably related to the Sicilian 'subculture' and social structure (Hess 1998 [1970]).

The apologetic dimension of the political and public discourse on the mafia, which was derived in part from this 'culturalist' paradigm, contributed to the construction of a myth around the phenomenon that often mirrored the representation given by the mafiosi themselves. As a consequence, what emerged was not the image of a united hierarchical organisation, but one with a nebulous outline that rendered the mafia too vague to be effectively identified or opposed. Therefore, for such a criminal association whose longevity had depended largely on internal secrecy and external ambiguity, exposure represented an unprecedented defeat that would inevitably change the course of its history. This was the mafia that Provenzano inherited in the mid-1990s.

Bernardo Provenzano: from 'tractor' to 'accountant'

Initially known as *u tratturi* (the tractor) for his reputation of extreme violence against enemies, Bernardo Provenzano later became known as *u raggiumeri* (the accountant) or *u professuri* (the professor) for his diplomatic skills in ruling Cosa Nostra (Grasso and La Licata 2008, 48–51). This transition from the character of 'the tractor' to that of 'the accountant' mirrored the perception that other mafiosi had of him before and after he took control of the organisation.

Nino Giuffrè, mafia defector and former right-hand man of Provenzano, confessed how, when he left prison in 1993, he found the boss to be a very different man: 'From being combative as he had been, now he was showing symptoms of sanctity' (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 22). The State's response to the attacks of the Corleonesi had exceeded the mafia's expectations, Giuffrè explained,⁷ thus Provenzano sought a strategy of 'submersion' aimed at rendering Cosa Nostra 'invisible' again:

The massacres in 1992 had been sheer madness, too much damage had been caused and it was necessary to find remedies . . . Provenzano needed to create a new image for himself because he had emerged with his bones broken from the slaughter. That's how his group has come to be known as the one which was against the massacres. But this wasn't true at all. Because

Provenzano in political matters, in political murders, has always been the number one. (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 24)

Indeed, despite his undoubted involvement in the *mattanza* and the myth of the ‘tractor that mowed everything down’ (Arlacchi 1992, 29), the general perception of Provenzano both within and outside the organisation was now far removed from this identity. For example, mafia defector Salvatore Barbagallo described him as a distinct, very well-mannered man. ‘I knew him with the nickname of *tabula rasa*’, Barbagallo confessed, ‘of professor, or accountant, but never as the tractor. Within Cosa Nostra I have always heard positive things about him’ (Oliva and Palazzolo 2006, 16). By the time Barbagallo gave this testimony in 1997, the strategy of ‘submersion’ was clearly in play.

During Riina’s time in command, Provenzano had taken a peripheral but nonetheless decisive role within Cosa Nostra. Behind the scenes, he had managed to build a solid network of relationships both within the organisation and outside, on economic and political levels, which would constitute a key strategy in his subsequent rise to the leadership. Furthermore, in the early 1990s, foreseeing the disastrous consequences that Riina’s bombing campaign would have for Cosa Nostra, Provenzano further withdrew from the scene. In doing so, he positioned himself to be effortlessly perceived as the natural successor to Riina’s dictatorial command as the dust settled.

In fact, some time after Riina’s arrest in 1993 and that in 1995 of Leoluca Bagarella – who was also in favour of the strategy of terror – Provenzano held a meeting with his most reliable collaborators to convince them of the urgency of a period of ‘submersion’, whereby the organisation could be silently restructured before resuming its previous activities and engaging in new businesses under a more covert guise. During this period of time, no killings could take place except in extraordinary circumstances and only if authorised by Provenzano. The long-term aim was to bring Cosa Nostra back into the institution, regain the social consensus lost after the bombing strategy and eventually resume control over territory (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 23–25). Initially, however, it was necessary to legitimise and consolidate his leadership within an organisation severely damaged at a structural level.

Bernardo Provenzano ruled the mafia for over a decade whilst in hiding. He carefully avoided the use of telephones, computers and personal meetings to minimise the risks of being apprehended, and began to issue orders via the *pizzini* (small typewritten, hand-delivered notes).⁸ From this point on, the *pizzini* would become not only the main means of communication for the entire organisation, but also the ideal vehicle for Provenzano to rebuild Cosa Nostra upon a solid ideological structure based on a renewed religious identity.⁹ Religion would therefore play a pivotal role in the way Provenzano established his leadership, succeeded in mediating between different mafia ‘families’ by creating a less centralised, more reticular structure, and eventually prevented the decline of the organisation.

Religion, ritual and symbols: a matter of performance

The role of religion in Provenzano’s social interactions with the lower echelons of Cosa Nostra can be analysed from the perspective that social scientists have adopted in studies of religion in ritual performances. Performance, in its most basic definition, means ‘action’

and, in particular, can be intended as:

... a mode of action taken by real and familiar people to affect the lives of other real and familiar people. Participants in ritual may be 'acting', but they are not necessarily 'just pretending.' They are 'enacting', which contradicts neither the notion of belief nor the practice of theatrical acting. (Alexander 1997, 154)

Scholars from a number of disciplines – notably anthropology, sociology, linguistics and folklore¹⁰ – have long been interested in ritual and performance for the insights they can offer into social realities. Being symbolic actions, rituals can be studied both for their meaning and for their effects on the participants. In Bruce Lincoln's theory (1991, 6), a ritual is 'a coherent set of symbolic actions that has a real transformative effect on individuals and social groups', and that has the potential to 'transform people, replacing old roles, statuses, and identities with new ones'. Richard Bauman (1977) and Charles Briggs (1988) also saw in ritual performance the distinctive potential for transforming and creating 'social structure':¹¹

There is... a distinctive potential in performance by its very nature, which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance. It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. (Bauman 1977, 43)

According to these anthropologists, the social actors enhance their performances in order to gain control and authority over their audience and 'to interpret traditions and social settings, actively transforming both in the course of their performances'. In other words, it is argued that social structure 'emerges' and can be transformed through the performative act. The emergent quality of performance depends on the actors' competence, on the enhancement of the act and on the goals of the participants (Bauman 1977, 38).

The anthropologist Victor Turner was also concerned with the role of rituals in society and with the ways people give meaning to their reality through the manipulation of cultural symbols. He identified in symbolic performative actions the pragmatic ability to resolve conflicts, strengthen relationships and create new social norms. In his view, symbols are essentially 'symbols in action' (1967, 29–32). In particular, those referring to the cultural codes of reference (e.g. religious symbols), have a high sensorial and ideological intensity that allows them to create emotions and to add sacred value to the entire ritual process. From Turner's perspective, symbols, rituals and religion are strictly related: ritual is essentially religious, and religion implies both ritualistic activities and a systematic corpus of belief (Turner and Turner 1982b, 201). Therefore, the participants in a ritual, by means of symbolic behaviour and language, ratify their belief in an existential dimension that provides unity and continuity to the morality of the social order. At the same time, the social actor is able to confer authoritative value on concepts of a general order, and to acquire legitimisation with, and power over, his/her audience.

The concept of ritual as a stereotypical sequence of symbolic actions enacted by the social actor and aimed at influencing the lives of other participants can be applied to Bernardo Provenzano's symbolic behaviour and language in his ritual of social interaction with other mafiosi. Furthermore, considerations of the emergent quality of performance and of the role that meaningful symbols exercise on the audience can be used to describe the effects of the boss's performance on his mafia 'audience'. However, to analyse the phenomenon in context, it is important to frame Provenzano's role as mafia leader within

the critical socio-historical situation that the Sicilian mafia experienced between the 1980s and the 1990s. In this regard, Turner's theory of 'social drama' provides a useful analytical device to explore the role of ritual performances in conflict situations.

Social drama in society: structure, anti-structure, *communitas*

Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1960/1909), Turner developed the social drama approach defined as a social process arising in conflict situations (1974, 37). Starting from the assumption that every community has a social structure 'in action', Turner uses this model of analysis to explore the hidden conflicts and tensions in both simple and complex societies, and to describe any dialectic crisis of continuity and change using dramaturgical terms. Social structure refers to the hierarchical arrangement of positions or social statuses, and is made up of the whole system of social relations that keeps a community in order. To maintain a balanced arrangement of social roles is fundamental for the everyday functioning of a community. What would happen to society should a conflict arise in its structure? In Turner's scheme a social drama would be likely to occur (Turner 1972, 91–92).

Thus, social drama refers to arguments, rites of passage, fights and all the changes that are implicitly dramatic because participants' actions take on a 'performed-for-an-audience aspect' (Schechner 1977, 120–23). It presents itself as a breach of social norms or as an infraction of a rule. A person can deliberately cause this rupture in order to challenge authority, or can cause it involuntarily. In either case, the action will interfere directly with the relationships that maintain balance in the social structure. Once this breach occurs, a conflict within the community originates and can only be solved by transforming and questioning those factors that had led to the crisis. Typically, there are four main phases of public action (Turner 1972, 91–94):

- (1) Breach of norm-governed social relations: a person or subgroup breaks a rule. This leads to a breach that is destined to widen into the phase of crisis.
- (2) Crisis: in this stage, conflicts between individuals, sections and factions follow the original breach, revealing hidden clashes of character, interest and ambition. This represents a serious threat to the group's unity and its very continuity, unless rapidly resolved by redressive public action, consensually undertaken by the group's leaders, elders, or guardians.
- (3) Redressive action: ranges from personal advice and informal mediation to formal legal actions and, if certain kinds of crisis require it, to the performance of public ritual.
- (4) Reintegration or Schism: depending on the efficacy of the redressive action, the final phase will consist either in the reintegration of the social group in crisis and restoration of normality, or in the social recognition of irremediable schism.

The focus of the analysis offered in this article is on the redressive action. During this highly 'liminal'¹² phase (Turner 1967, 93–95), the social actor 'meta-comments'¹³ upon the critical situation and offers alternatives to the pre-existing structure in the shape of an 'anti-structure', where the social positions and constraints are levelled out and new communitarian values are shared. Turner identifies three main liminal components of the redressive stage: the communication of sacred symbols through the use of images, words

and instructions to represent the unity and continuity of the social group; deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural codes that provoke the audience to reflect on the basic social values and on society in general; simplification of the social structure's relationships where the authority of the performer is the only remaining structural characteristic left (Turner 1967, 99–108). Meanwhile the rest of the participants, emotionally influenced by the crucial values that the symbols represent, now share a spirit of unity and of comradeship which Turner defines as 'communitas' (1969, 96). The concept of communitas is used here to describe the effects that the redressive action of Provenzano (the social actor) had on the rest of the organisation during the social drama experienced by the Sicilian mafia.

The redressive action of Bernardo Provenzano in the social drama of Cosa Nostra

Cosa Nostra can be considered in this context as a community whose social structure is made up of the entire system of relationships that maintains order. According to Turner's theory of social drama, when a conflict arises in the structure, the arrangement of positions or social status collapses, causing a breach within the community.

Prior to the second mafia war, for more than a century Cosa Nostra had aimed, with some success, at remaining 'invisible'. Analysed in terms of social drama, it is clear how the Corleonesi's strategy of violence and the consequent phenomenon of *pentitismo* (collaboration with the judicial authorities) caused a breach within the structure of the criminal organisation. Such a rupture threatened the stability of the social unit and widened into the phase of crisis. In Turner's scheme, this threat to the group's unity and continuity needed to be resolved by redressive public action undertaken by the group's leader. Provenzano's redressive action constituted an essential part of the mafia social drama.

After the initial breach and the consequent crisis, Provenzano opted to question the parameters around the social structure of the organisation, with the intention of piecing them together again to prevent the crisis from leading to an irreparable schism. First, in order to pacify all internal conflicts and establish his authority over the organisation, he needed to perfect a secure means of communication, which could enable mediation between rival mafia 'families' whilst living in hiding. Thus, the decision to use the *pizzini* as the main means of communication answered the specific needs of the strategy of 'submersion'.¹⁴

Furthermore, in order to gain consensus over the rest of the organisation, Provenzano had to convey in the text something more than mere dispositions or information. He needed to enact a role that represented a rupture with the mafia of the recent past and mirrored instead the characteristics of what mafiosi generally refer to as 'the mafia of the origins': sense of honour, ability to mediate, wisdom, religious devotion (Biagi 1994, 142–46). The tactics adopted by the mafia boss clearly reflect the dynamics of the redressive phase of the social drama.

If it is accepted that a ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication, the *pizzini* can be interpreted in this framework as a highly symbolic social ritual of interaction through which Provenzano was able to 'enact' his role of 'devoted' leader who does not issue orders with the authority of an undisputed dictator but with the diplomacy of a charismatic mediator. In regard to the considerations concerning

the liminal features of the redressive action in the social drama of Cosa Nostra, we can hypothesise a liminal, levelled-out anti-structure. The three main components that Turner identified in liminality – communication of sacred symbols, reconstruction and reinterpretation of social values, simplification of social structure – recur within the ‘drama’ of the Sicilian mafia.

Bernardo Provenzano communicated sacred values through the use of symbolic religious language to represent the unity and continuity of the social group in crisis. By using recurrent references to the ‘moral’ dimension of Cosa Nostra, where religion has always occupied a central position, he provoked the audience to reflect on the communitarian ‘values’ of the mafia. Provenzano systematically underlined verses from the Bible and took notes of relevant passages to be threaded through otherwise routine instructions regarding daily business matters.¹⁵ His collaborator Pino Lipari, for example, expressed his gratitude to the boss for the verses of the Bible he had sent him:

So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:17–20)¹⁶

Another example, the expression *Vi benedica il Signore e vi protegga* (The Lord bless you and keep you), from the Book of Numbers (6:24), closes almost every *pizzino* (Figure 1).

19-04-2001.

Carissimo, con l'augurio che aveti, passato Una Buona Felicissima Serena Santa Pasqua, e che vi trovi a tutti in ottima salute. Come grazie a Dio, al momento, posso dire di me.

1) Senti ho ricevuto, raccomandazione, d'uno amico Che avessi raccomandato, cose come lavori? a B n. e vuole che me ni occupi io, mà io non sò, o non rigordo niente, Puoi tu farmi la cortesia, se c'è qualcosa tra te e B n. Riguardo lavori di dirmeli, quali sono, e se è possibile, il nome dell'impresa e patti fatti o da fare, e se è possibile, darmi al più presto tutte le risposti che mi devi. In'attesa di tuoi riscondri, smetto augurandovi x tutti un mondo di bene, inviandovi i più cari Aff. saluti per tutti.

Vi benedica il Signore e vi protegga!

Figure 1. *Pizzino* sent by Bernardo Provenzano to Nino Giuffrè. Source: Palazzolo and Prestipino (2008, 306).

Provenzano recurrently thanked 'Our Lord Jesus Christ', and referred to 'The Divine Providence' and 'Our beloved Lord', expressing the hope that 'He might help us to do the right things'.

God was also invoked in matters of violence. 'I have nothing to say except let the will of God be done', Provenzano wrote in a *pizzino* discussing a murder plot (Longrigg 2008, 151). In particular, the expression *Con il volere di Dio* (With God's will), to date has been counted 43 times, and it often appears more than once in the same piece of communication:

Know that with God's will I am at your complete disposal, but I detest confusion... with God's will I want to be your servant, command me if possible with calm and secrecy and let's try and move on, hoping in your collaboration with mm. I conclude for now with the typewriter but not with my heart, and I send my dearest, most sincere and affectionate greetings to everybody. (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 303)¹⁷

As the example shows, the closing line of Provenzano's *pizzini* regularly included wishes to everyone for 'all the goodness of the world' as well as the 'dearest, most sincere and affectionate greetings to everybody'. In two particular circumstances where Provenzano evaded police raids after tip-offs, the reference in his *pizzini* to the help of God aroused suspicion that the religious invocations might hide a secret code. However, the recipient of the *pizzini* in question, mafia defector Nino Giuffrè, dismissed this interpretation (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 8–10). In general, the most accredited interpretation is that Provenzano derived inspiration from the Bible to write his messages because it represents a shared cultural heritage from which to derive legitimisation and a sense of belonging.¹⁸

Anthropological studies on ritual, described in the first part of this analysis, show how the use of powerful symbols works effectively on the most superficial, cognitive and emotional level of the participants. Therefore, the textual references from the Bible and the religious formulas in the *pizzini* have a high sensorial and ideological charge that allowed Provenzano to create emotions and add sacred value to his performative actions. At the same time, the social actor, by means of symbolic behaviour and language, ratified his belief in the existential dimension, which provides unity and continuity to the 'morality' of the mafia social order. 'Emergency' – the ability to let social structure emerge to meta-comment upon it and offer new alternatives (Bauman 1977) – is also an evident quality of Provenzano's performative behaviour and language. In fact, references to the factors that had threatened the stability of the organisation frequently emerged in Provenzano's interaction with other mafiosi. A letter sent by mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro to Provenzano in 2004 represents a clear example of meta-commentary upon the consequences that Riina's strategy had on Cosa Nostra:

I read your letter and the beautiful words you used. You say that we are in the same boat and we have to do our best not to let it sink, and that I have to find a way to overcome the difficulties in order for us to be appreciated again rather than criticised...¹⁹

Similarly, in one of the first *pizzini* written to his collaborator Luigi Ilardo in 1994, Provenzano drew the attention to the 'sofferenze sofferti' [*sic*] ('suffered sufferance') during the crisis of Cosa Nostra:

I beg you to be calm and diligent, correct and coherent, to learn from the experience of suffered sufferance. Do not dismiss entirely what other people say, but remember that one

proof is never enough to judge; you need at least three, and correctness and coherence
(Bolzoni 2008, 81)

The same tone accompanies a *pizzino* addressed to Giovanni Brusca, boss of San Giuseppe Iato and one of the Corleonesi's main allies. Concerned about the disputes occurring among other mafiosi, Provenzano invited Brusca to ask them on his behalf to avoid doing 'cose sgradevole' [*sic*] (unpleasant things) and, at the same time, to help him rein the organisation in.²⁰ Having said that the emergent quality of performance depends on the competence of the social actor and on the goals of the participants (Bauman 1977, 38), one can see how Provenzano made a social display of his competence by demonstrating the diplomacy typical of a mediator as distinct from the tyranny of Totò Riina. A letter sent to mafia boss Salvatore Genovese in 1997 embodies Provenzano's art of diplomacy and mediation:

My dearest, it is with immense joy that I received your news, and I am very pleased to hear that you all are in good health. This I can say about myself. I understand the reasons that inspired you to write to me. I thank you for your trust and I apologise in advance should I disappoint you. There are many difficulties because of our distance from one another and things can only be done with God's will. . . . Apologising for my mistakes and for my answers where they have not been what you were expecting, I conclude for now, reminding you that I am always at your complete disposal and wishing you all the goodness of this world. The Lord bless you and keep you.²¹

Provenzano's performative competence is therefore a key attribute of his leadership; it lies in his ability to mediate between the various clans, assuming the role of a charismatic leader endowed with understanding and a willingness to live a life of sacrifice and renunciation. He rarely gave orders; instead he frequently asked for some. 'God willing, I want to be a servant; give me orders' (Follain 2008, 266). 'My dearest, not being able to do it in person', Provenzano wrote in a *pizzino* to noted mafioso Antonio Rotolo, 'we have to be grateful to Divine Providence for the means [of communication] provided. This way, with God's Will, I reply to your dear letter' (Bolzoni 2008, 81).

In general, by enacting the role of *primus inter pares* in contrast to that of boss *legibus solutus* of his predecessor, Provenzano simplified the relations making up the social structure of the mafia, leaving his leadership as the sole form of authority. The affiliates experienced this liminality as a transition between what the organisation had recently been and what it was to become (in Turner's words they were 'betwixt and between' two states). Emotionally influenced by the crucial values referred to by their leader in his ritual performance, mafiosi now shared that feeling of solidarity and unity characteristic of a *communitas*: the unstructured, or elementarily structured, community of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elder (Turner 1969, 96). The religious performative behaviour and language used by Provenzano in his written communication became a means for the production of solidarity in the form of collective emotions and their symbolic representations.

The response of the audience

An analysis of the *pizzini* addressed to Provenzano and written by other mafia and family members is useful to show the effects that the leader's performance had on his audience. In response to the verses of the Bible that Provenzano had sent him, his close collaborator Pino Lipari wrote in a *pizzino*:

I was particularly impressed by the verse according to which a tree can be recognized by its fruit You are altruistic, wise, you take life as it comes, like a gift from God. Your faith is strong and sustains you. God has enlightened you and I always pray that He will always protect you for your own good and for that of all of us who love you.²²

Similarly, Pino Lipari's cousin Gaetano concluded a *pizzino* including religious and deferential phrases that bear resemblance to those found in Provenzano's messages: 'I conclude for now, hoping that this letter finds you in better health. I remind you that I am always at your complete disposal. May God keep and protect us all and you in a special way' (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 59). An analogous tone appears in the letters written by Sandro Lo Piccolo, young mafioso and son of the powerful mafia boss of Palermo Salvatore Lo Piccolo:

My dearest uncle, I truly hope that you and your family are well. I write you this message to wish you well from the bottom of my heart, in the hope that you may spend this Holy Happy Easter in the best and most serene way. I love you so much!! May God always be with you!!! My best wishes for a Happy Easter. (Palazzolo and Prestipino, 57)

A series of notes found by the police in Lo Piccolo's hideout in 2007 appear to have been put together to create a 'dictionary of the perfect mafia boss'.²³ 'I hope from the bottom of my heart that this message finds you in good health', the mafioso wrote, along with expressions like 'With God's will' and 'In life there is a human value that counts more than freedom, and it is honour and dignity'. The language used in these notes strongly suggests Lo Piccolo's intention to emulate Provenzano's style. Likewise, Lo Piccolo may have singled out a number of sentences such as 'You can count on me any time you want' and 'ask me and I will be happy to help' as expressions denoting wisdom, availability and understanding. A similar willingness for sacrifice and renunciation to that seen in Provenzano's *pizzini* is represented by phrases like 'Destiny has put a strain on me' or 'Despite the adversities, I try to mark every day of my life in the best way I can' and 'In the adversities of life I put myself in God's hands'.

Destiny, honour and God are terms that also recur in the *pizzini* sent by Matteo Messina Denaro who, still on the run, is considered to be the new boss of bosses of Cosa Nostra. In a letter sent to Salvatore Lo Piccolo, Messina Denaro blames four *sbirri infami* (traitors) for 'piloting' his destiny and that of Lo Piccolo and for 'leaving them with no other choice but to suffer the same fate with the dignity that distinguishes them from the others'. 'Despite the anger', Messina Denaro continues, 'they [the traitors] remain invertebrates and cowards, while we, in our misfortune, will live according to God's will and above all, with honour'.²⁴ The letter hints at Messina Denaro's attempt to follow in Provenzano's steps by demonstrating the art of diplomacy necessary to mediate among the mafia 'families' whilst establishing his authority as a leader. However, it is in their private correspondence that Messina Denaro acknowledges Provenzano's undisputed authority with a deference that is directly proportional to the demeanour of his boss. In a letter sent in 2004, Messina Denaro listed the reasons for asking Provenzano to personally handle a matter involving a third person:

(1) because I trust you and you only; (2) because I looked to you to sort this matter and there is no reason for having anybody else involved; (3) because I only recognise your authority; (4) because we are able to understand each other even without the need to look into each other's eyes My gratitude for your trust in me is immense. To this, I can only add that I

am at your mercy, that whatever you do is right, and the way you do things can only lead us [Cosa Nostra] to be esteemed again.

A passage that Provenzano underlined in his Bible, 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die' (Ecclesiastes 3:1–2), also recurs in one of the obituaries that every year since 1998 Matteo Messina Denaro writes in memory of his father.²⁵

People who were not affiliated to the organisation also used religious references. The letters written by Provenzano's wife, Saveria Benedetta Palazzolo, contained opening and closing lines resembling those found in the *pizzini* of her husband:

My Dearest Love, with God's will I received your message and I read that you are well. The same I can say about us We are serene, what has been destined for us by God cannot be changed, but the Lord needs to give us the strength to resist My Life, I conclude now with the Holy Blessing, may the light of God shine above you and help you, and may it give us the strength to tolerate and the holy faith.

A wish for 'La Santa Benedizione di Dio' (The Holy Blessing of God) also concludes the letters written by Bernardo Provenzano's son. 'I now conclude with my computer but not with my heart', wrote Angelo Provenzano to his father, 'may God bless you and protect you despite what people say and do, and give us the grace to live under his holy light'.²⁶

That the audience emulated Provenzano's style, rather than suggesting the existence of a secret code behind the repeated religious references and the diplomatic language, is indicative of the practice of deference and demeanour (Goffman 1967) taking place within the everyday written ritual of interaction. The more the audience acknowledged the leader's competence and authority, the more Provenzano's identity was 'allotted a kind of sacredness displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts' (Goffman 1967, 47). As a result of this process, the myth of the killer able to 'shoot like a god'²⁷ was to be replaced by that of the leader of mediation and diplomacy, 'illuminated by the light of God'.

Conclusion

This study has used an interdisciplinary approach to analyse the role of religion in the written communication between mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano and the lower echelons of the Sicilian mafia. The religious performative behaviour and language used by Provenzano made the *pizzini* a perfect example of a highly symbolic order of ritual interaction, 'a social ritual through which he was able to establish his own identity as a leader inspired and sustained by his faith in God' (Dino 2008, 126). The *pizzini*, imbued with religious symbolism, soon became a symbol in themselves of Provenzano's new strategy aimed at revitalising Cosa Nostra after the disastrous policy of his predecessors. By commenting on the critical factors that had led to the crisis within Cosa Nostra, Provenzano gradually presented an alternative to a social structure in crisis. He created an anti-structure where, instead of the authoritarian reign of the mafia boss, there was a new system of social relations directed by the diplomatic measures of a 'devout' leader. The recurring references to the crucial values of religion deeply affected the relations with other mafiosi and gave a sense of solidarity and cohesiveness to the organisation as a whole. The feelings of unity and comradeship shared by the mafia communitas are evident in the response of the mafiosi to Provenzano's performance. Through the use of symbolic language in his *pizzini* and by affecting his audience at an emotional level, he managed to

confer sacred and authoritative value to his general-order conceptions, to enhance participation and, eventually, to acquire legitimisation of his leadership over the group.

After the arrest of Provenzano in 2006 and that of numerous other bosses a few months later, it had been argued that ‘the Sicilian mafia was on its knees’.²⁸ However, whilst Cosa Nostra has clearly been weakened at the organisational level, its illegal business has remained unaffected by the arrests, and continues to generate substantial profits.²⁹ Evidence also demonstrates not only that the *pizzini* remain the preferred system of communication for Cosa Nostra, but also that mafiosi at the top echelon in many instances emulate Provenzano’s style.³⁰ This clearly shows the efficacy of Provenzano’s redressive strategy in the *social drama* that occurred between the 1980s and the 1990s, and the ability of the boss to save the organisation from the resulting crisis.

Through the years, Provenzano has been described as a ‘political mastermind’ (Oliva and Palazzolo 2001), a ‘business strategist’, a ‘great mediator’ (Longrigg 2008), and as the founding father of a *Cosa Nuova* (‘New Thing’ or New Cosa Nostra) (Oliva and Palazzolo 2006). Yet, above all, he represents the essence of the Sicilian mafia: the ability to adapt to changing times using violence and mediation when necessary; to combine modern business strategies with archaic systems of communication; to create social consensus through a solid religious identity. Provenzano, Judge Giovanni Falcone would say, represents an intrinsic characteristic of the mafia’s nature: ‘its ability to change, yet fundamentally remaining the same’ (Falcone 1991, 42).

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version 2001.
2. Umberto Santino used the term *transculturata mafiosa* (mafia ‘transculture’) as a ‘dynamic concept, open to new influences despite being strongly anchored to old values’ (my translation).
3. Contrary to general perception, the term mafia ‘family’ generally does not correspond to the biological family unit but refers to the local clan (Lupo 2004, 33).
4. Mafia defector Tommaso Buscetta explained how ‘above the mafia families and serving the purpose of coordinating the different groups is a collegial structure known as the Commission, made up of members each one of whom represents three families that are geographically close together’ (Tribunale di Palermo 1984, 4–5).
5. It is important to specify that testimonies of *pentiti* (literally ‘penitents’) were used as early as the nineteenth century. However, their confessions had systematically been disregarded. In this respect, Tommaso Buscetta was not the first mafioso to break the code of silence (*omertà*) in the course of the history of the Sicilian mafia, but the first one to be believed.
6. The ‘culturalist’ perspective constituted the grounds for the socio-anthropological debate that took place in the 1970s (Hess 1998 [1970], Blok 1974, Schneider and Schneider 1976; Arlacchi 1983). One common thread uniting these studies was the idea of mafiosi as individuals who were related to each other by family and clientelistic relations and by precise cultural behaviour rather than by an affiliation to a structured, secret organisation.
7. Procedimento Penale no. 124/97 R.G. contro Biondolillo Giuseppe + altri, deposizione dell’imputato Antonino Giuffrè, udienza del 16 Ottobre 2002 (c/o Aula Bunker Carcere Due

Palazzi – Padova), 110–39. Also in Commissione Parlamentare d’Inchiesta sul Fenomeno della Criminalità Organizzata Mafiosa o Similare (istituita con legge 19 ottobre 2001, n. 386), Doc. XXIII, no. 3, 51–52.

8. The first examples of *pizzini* sent by Provenzano date back to 1994, when police informant Luigi Ilardo gave his copies to lieutenant colonel Michele Riccio. Other copies were found over the years; however, it was the *pizzini* archive found in Provenzano’s hideout in 2006 that would reveal the scope and dimension of this communication system.
9. Forms of writings like the *pizzini* were employed by the mafia as early as the nineteenth century in the form of the so-called *lettere di scrocco* (‘scrounge letters’), used to extort the money of landowners, and the *palummedde* (‘little doves’), brief messages sporadically employed to send details of appointments when it was not possible to communicate them through other means (Santoro 2007, 124–29). However, testimonies of defectors and the lack of evidence of an established written communication system akin to the *pizzini* indicate that, before Provenzano, Cosa Nostra had primarily used face-to-face interactions to communicate. Thus, the extraordinary value of the *pizzini* in mafia research lies in the inside view they offer into Cosa Nostra’s ‘world’, and its dynamics of power, social relations and cultural values. In particular, in regard to this study, the repeated religious references the *pizzini* are imbued with allow for the first time an analysis of the role of religion in the relational context of micro-social interactions within Cosa Nostra.
10. In particular, sociologists like Durkheim, van Gennep and Max Weber, and anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown, laid the groundwork for future studies of religion, rituals and society.
11. In Social Sciences, the expression ‘social structure’ refers to the system of rules, institutions and practices that regulate the relations among individuals within a social group.
12. Turner defined ‘liminality’ as the transitional state between two phases in which individuals are ‘betwixt and between’ – they do not belong to the society that they previously were a part of, and they are not yet re-incorporated into that society.
13. Metacommentary is ‘a story that a group tells itself about itself’ (Turner 1982a), or a self-reflection on events that the group has experienced.
14. In contrast to Totò Riina’s way of holding personal meetings to announce his unquestionable decisions from the ‘pope’s throne’ at the head of the meeting table (Palazzolo and Prestipino 2008, 17), Provenzano’s leadership over a less centralised and hierarchical Cosa Nostra required a communication system that could facilitate mediation.
15. The continuous underlining, numbering and use of symbols suggests the existence of a secret code among the verses of the sacred Text. However, neither the academics, the theologian, the mathematician, nor the FBI cryptographers who have analysed Provenzano’s Bible, have confirmed the theory of the coded messages. Their studies have concluded instead that the godfather read and used the Bible as a source of inspiration to write his *pizzini* and confer authority to his role. Provenzano’s copy of the Bible is still under investigation. Recently, some pages of the Bible have been published online by journalist Salvo Palazzolo, <http://www.ipezzimancanti.it/?p=514> (accessed February 2, 2011).
16. Viviano, Francesco. 2002. Assegna appalti, legge la Bibbia, ecco le lettere segrete di Binnu, *La Repubblica*, October 4.
17. *Pizzino* sent from Provenzano to Luigi Ilardo, *La Repubblica*, November 11, 1988.
18. From a paper presented by sociologist Alessandra Dino at the Conference *Sotto le due Cupole: Chiesa, religione, mafia. Quali percorsi per una nuova legalità?* held in Rome, 24 September. The video of the conference is available online <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/311099> (accessed June 7, 2011).
19. Some letters written by Matteo Messina Denaro to Provenzano have been made available online by journalist Salvo Palazzolo at <http://www.ipezzimancanti.it/?p=615>. The paragraph quoted is an extract of the letter sent on May 25, 2004.
20. *Pizzino* sent by Provenzano to Giovanni Brusca, seized on the occasion of Procedimento Penale no. 3634/96 N.C., during Brusca’s arrest in Cannatello di Agrigento on May 20, 1996.
21. Letter from Provenzano to Salvatore Genovese, boss of San Giuseppe Jato, dated October 1, 1997. The document is part of the Procedimento Penale nr. 1687/96 R.G.N.R. DDA, seized during the arrest of Giuseppe Maniscalco on October 10, 1997.

22. Viviano, Francesco. 2002. Caccia al tesoro di Provenzano. I suoi segreti in un computer. *La Repubblica*, October 4.
23. *La Repubblica*, January 16, 2008. <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/05/gallerie/cronaca/dizionario-perfetto-mafioso/2.html> (accessed January 12, 2011).
24. <http://www.ipezzimancanti.it/?p=615> (accessed January 2011).
25. <http://www.malitalia.it/2010/12/vangelo-latino-e-mafia-i-necrologi-di-francesco-messina-denaro/>.
26. <http://www.bernardoprovenzano.net/download/> (accessed November 4, 2010).
27. D'Avanzo, Giuseppe. 2006. La vera storia di Provenzano: Siino: 'Sparava come un dio'. *La Repubblica*, April 14, <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/04/sezioni/cronaca/provenzano2/provenzano2/provenzano2.html?ref=search> (accessed April 12, 2010).
28. From an interview with the chief of Antimafia Italian Department Piero Grasso, published in *La Repubblica*, June 20, 2006. <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/04/sezioni/cronaca/provenzano3/maxi-blitz/maxi-blitz.html> (accessed May 5, 2011).
29. The 2010 report by Confesercenti shows that the mafia phenomenon across Italy has a turnover of €130 billion and a profit approaching €70 billion. <http://www.sosimpresa.it/news.php?id=21707> (accessed March 3, 2011).
30. In particular, I refer to the *pizzini* written by bosses Sandro Lo Piccolo and Matteo Messina Denaro, described in the section 'the response of the audience'. See notes 17, 21, 22.

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