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ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN SICILY

Historical Heritage and the major challenges of the present times

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Abstract**:** *Islamic communities play a pivotal role in today's Sicily. Islam is relevant now, as it was in the Middle Ages. During Arabic occupation (827- 1060), this Island was part of Islamic world as en emirate. Muslims continued to be influential even in subsequent times under Norman (1060- 1094) and Hohenstaufen rulers (1194-1266). After this multicultural period of toleration, Aragonese and Spanish occupation lead to oblivion of the Islamic past. The repressed memory of Muslim Sicily dissimulated the absence of otherness since 14th and 15th century. In the second half of the 20th century, Islamic presence in Sicily noticeably increased. Apart from individual conversions, we must consider migration from North Africa and Middle East. Subsequently, well-established communities are now especially active in many Sicilian towns. They play an important part in cooperation with Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups. It is noteworthy to value initiatives aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue. At this respect, there are remarkable activities under the patronage of the Islamic Centre in Messina with the support of the local Archbishopric. I focus on a conference held in the city mosque in October 2019 in the presence of the President of Islamic Community and local Catholic Archbishop. At the occasion, the presenters discussed the encounter between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kāmil height hundred years before. This historical example is seen today as an antecedent of interreligious meetings that equally applies for the present times. This topic offered the way of better considering religious dialogue in Mediterranean space according to transcultural perspectives which emerge in a globalized world.*

Keywords*: Islam, Sicily, religious dialogue, ecumenism, transcultural process, inclusion.*

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Introduction

It is noteworthy to analyse the role of Sicilian Islamic communities in the light of the past and with an eye to the future. I will deserve special attention to the theme of Islamic presence in my birth-town, Messina, where we notice a particularly favourable context of socio-political and cultural life. In fact, Sicily has a peculiar background. Contrary to other European countries, a significant presence of Islamic communities is not a new phenomenon in this island at the centre of Mediterranean (Camassa, 2015 p. 125). Islam has historical roots dating back to the Middle ages, proven by linguistic, literary, artistic, epigraphic and folkloric evidences. It represents a typical expression of the Sicilian identity. Undeniably, Islam belongs to the history of Sicily which became part of the Muslim world in the 9th century. Arabic conquest was followed by a political consolidation marked by a new religious establishment after the collapse of Roman-Byzantine rule (Amari 1939; Afimad 1975; Rizzitano 1983; Guichard, 2000 pp. 15-16, 45-47). At this respect, we find a comparison in medieval Spain. Sicily shares cultural and ideological features with al-Andalus, it is closely linked with Muslim mainstream (Guichard, 2000 pp. 34-38). The legacy of Medieval past sheds light on contemporary Sicilian Islam which cannot be neglected as a dynamic reality that opens new possibilities for the future.

Islam in Sicily, yesterday and today

The history of Islamic Sicily spanning roughly 827-1060 presents a model on which we must reflect. The Islamic conquest of Sicily was organized by the province of Ifrīqiya under the Aghlabid rule. It is noteworthy that a revered Muslim jurist and theologian such as Asad ibn al-Furāt (Harran 759 – Syracuse 828) was chosen to lead this campaign which was "launched in the full pageantry of jihad" (Granara, 2019 p. 3). This highly respected scholar in his mid-sixties was a spiritual leader, he strongly influenced liturgical and religious life of Sicilian Islam, which was based on Sunni-Maliki school of law (*madhhab*). Beyond any doubt, Sicily highly imitated Arabo-Islamic mainstream (Granara, 2006 pp. 744-745).

Islamic presence in Sicily was also relevant in Norman times (1060-1194). After the Norman conquest toward the middle of the 11th century, Western newcomers established a Christian rule in a Latin form. The Hauteville governed upon a Muslim majority of population, who will maintain customs and culture for a long time (Bresc 1989; Guichard, 2000 pp. 60-64; Nef 2011). The indigenous Muslim population came under non-Muslim rule, their homeland forfeited the status of *dār al-Islām*, "the home of Islam" to become *dār al-Kufr*, "the home of misbelief" (Udovitch, 1994 p. 192; Barone, 2003 p. 107, with respect to fatāwā of Muslim lawyers which justify their coreligionists established in Christian kingdoms such as Norman Sicily or 15th century Spain). Apart from Sicily, other historical examples are Spain, where al-Andalus existed from

711 to 1492 when the Christian Kings recaptured it and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which belonged to Ottoman Empire from 1463 to 1878 when the Congress of Berlin surrendered it to Austria-Hungary, as Dževada Šuško (2019 p. 7) pointed out.

Sicilian Islam expresses its proud for its survival in artistic and aesthetic unity of Arab-Norman style which refers to a combination of styles such as Arabic/Moorish, Romanesque or Roman-Sicilian, and Greek Byzantine. These styles were fused so to create an hybrid style which relates to the unity of Sicilian subjects, whether they were Muslims, Roman-Catholics or Greek Orthodox (Rebold Benton, 2009 p. 87).

In the 2nd half of the 12th century, Palermo (Arabic Balarm) was an Islamic-Christian capital (Guichard, 2000 pp. 71-73), where the Palazzo dei Normanni (Norman Royal Palace) stands. Within this Palace is the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel), the Norman royal chapel, whose painted wooden ceiling vaults include muqarnas. These architectural elements resembling stalactites are one of the most common features of Islamic architecture. They almost simultaneously developed in Iraq and in North Africa. They consist of cells and of intermediate elements connecting the roofs of two adjacent cells (Dold-Samplonius & Harmsen, 2005 pp. 86-87). This masterpiece of Arabic style is unique in a Christian church. It evidently reflects Norman Sicily's cultural complexity under king Roger II of Hauteville (1095-1154) who commissioned these "Islamic" ceilings for his chapel around 1140 (Ettinghausen et al., 2001 p. 298; Rebold-Benton, 2009 pp. 87-89; Walker, 2010 p. 84; Kapitaikin 2011). Muqarna ceilings in Palatine Chapel also attest the transmission of Central Asian imagery because the similarity of some paintings and decorative patterns such as feline bodies (Gasparini, 2020 pp. 156-157, 169: «Farther afield, some of the patterns decorating the muqarnas of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, built by the worshippers of the three Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism– reveal its Central Asian and Western Asian heritage.»). In Palermo, muqarnas decorative elements were also featured in Cuba and Uscibene Palaces (Gabrielli & Scerrato, 1985 p. 323; Marcais, 1954 p. 120; Guichard, 2000 p. 74).

The German Hohenstaufen rulers (1194-1266) did not put an end to religious toleration of Norman times, but a more centralized power emerged in spite of minorities. However, Muslim community still flourished, albeit in a different way, especially in Western Sicily with a high degree of resilience. Despite of episodes of military and political repression against Muslim minorities, the polyglot Frederick II was, however, a true friend of Islam. He was fluent in Arabic, he showed an aptitude of understanding towards the other two great monotheist religions, whose liturgical and theological rule was well known to him (Gabrieli 1958; Udovitch, 1998 p. 192; Barone, 2003 p. 107).

In later decades, the last Muslims of Sicily went into inexorable decline. Subsequently, the oblivion of the Islamic past marked the policy of Spanish Sicily under the Aragonese Crown and the Christian Kings starting from the 14th and 15th century (Zarcone, 2017 p. 188). The repressed memory of Sicilian Islamic past dissimulated absence of otherness, Jewish communities being expulsed from Spanish viceroy-

alties of Sicily and Naples after 1492 (Costanza 2009). This reject of Muslim roots persisted until recently. However, Arab rule exerted a significant influence in Sicily, as we also deduce from folkloric evidence. Giufà (or Giucà), the hero of popular Sicilian folktales, dates back from Arabian sources. He is known under different names. The Arabian Giufà is named Guhā (in Morocco, he is Zha, in Persia Djoha, in Nubia Gawhā), his Turkish name is Nasr-ed-Din Hoca, hence the Albanian Nastradin Hoxha, the Bosnian Nasruddin Khoja, the Macedonian Stradin Hoca and further variants from Iran, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan until China. The Arabian Guhā acts in paradoxical and absurd ways, he subtly criticises social conventions and religious norms. His Sicilian descendant, Giufà, is also a social outcast who is seen as a fool (*babbu*) and a madman (*foddi*), but his naïveté helps him to overcome the vexations of upper classes. Finally, he is a clear paradigm of the Wise fool. The spread of this traditional Arabian character of Trickster-fool, who is still alive in Sicilian folklore, goes back to a Mediterranean, Balkan and Central Asian koiné (Corrao, 1991 pp. 21-27; Ead., 2001 p. 135; Terzi, 2020 pp. 32-35; Petruzzella 2022). The same Euro-Mediterranean context applies to the *cunto*, an actor practice still very popular in Sicily, unparalleled in Southern Italy. As Dario Tomasello (2021, pp. 51-54, 63-65, 69-71) showed in his masterly analysis, we may compare Sicilian *cunto* to oral storytelling by performing artists in Maghreb (*halqa*), Syria and Iran (*naqqāli*). The Sicilian storyteller (*cuntista*) explores the different ways to make a living word through his personal, emotional and physical gesture. He employs a body language with remarkable expressiveness and physicality. He marks the times of the story by holding a sword, that is, a clear initiatory symbol. His narrative matters remounts to Chansons de geste and Opera dei Pupi (Puppet theatre), every performance implies many ritual elements linked with the conflict between Muslims and Christians. Finally, the *cunto* evokes common roots of the Mediterranean area. It is to be seen as a witness of a shared memory across political, religious, linguistic borders. It is highly significant that Islamic civilization inspired this artistic performance at various latitudes. And even if Islam plays the role of the enemy in Sicilian *cunto*, this popular storytelling enhances the Arabic archetypal of Sicilian identity (*ibid.*, p. 67).

Today, new challenges arise. Islamic presence in Sicily has increased considerably over the last few years. We amount religious conversions to Islam at various levels. On the other hand, this was in large part due to immigration from North Africa and the Middle East since the 2nd half of the 20th century, as it already happened in Central and Northern Europe a few decades earlier. The migration phenomenon is not to be merely considered as a social burden, but indeed as an opportunity to build an inclusive society, as Gerard Kester (2022) suggested on the grounds of his documented analyses: Europeans with a migrant background are called upon to engage in this project of inclusiveness together with their fellow citizens (or fellow citizens to be).

Subsequently, well-established Islamic communities are active in major and smaller towns of Sicily, where cultural centres play a pivotal role in social life in con-

formity with that which generally happens in Italy (Ferrari, 2009 pp. 219-221, 226-228; Camassa, 2015 pp. 124-128). In particular, Sicilian communities steadily take part in an interactive process face to major changes of contemporary society. Their members are in close connection with Italian institutions are committed to make a contribution to the social development of this country. By the way, the Islamic Centre of Messina was the first centre in Italy to host in its premises an anti-Covid vaccination team. In Summer 2021, this service served to raise public awareness of the importance of getting vaccinated, in order to solve pandemic crisis.

We may also remark that the dialogue between Islamic community and local Roman Catholic Church and/or other religious groups is long-standing and continually increasing. It is a great chance to copy the complexities of multiculturalism against well- spread preconceptions. It becomes dangerous when massive ignorance breeds prejudices and threatens communities' peaceful coexistence, especially for Islamic minority. Growing in knowledge and understanding of other groups as Muslim communities helps break down barriers that prevent us from creating a society respectful of multiple identities. Integration between different groups begins with mutual awareness, which can break stereotypes. Beyond any doubt, misconceptions about Islam usually come from religious concepts such as *sharī'a* or *jihād*, which are misunderstood or disregarded by public opinion, as Dario Tomasello recalls us (2003b pp. 367, 374; Id., 2018 pp. 15, 167-169, 277-281).

The reciprocal acquiring of knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for a transcultural process. At this respect, we may recall a noteworthy conference organized in October 2019 by the Islamic Cultural Centre of Messina chaired by President Mr Mohamed Refaat, in agreement with the Roman Catholic Church. It took place in the city Mosque in the presence of Messina's Archbishop Mgr. Giovanni Accolla and many representatives of the Islamic community, faithful Catholics, together with members of the Academic community. This meeting was presented under the title: "1219 Francesco e il Sultano una prova di dialogo – Comunità Cristiana e Comunità Islamica Messina" (that is: 1219 Francis and the Sultan: A testing ground for the dialogue. – Christian Community and Islamic Community in Messina). It was devoted to debate upon a justly celebrated historical event such as the encounter between Saint Francis of Assisi and Ayyūbid Sultan of Egypt and Syria Malik al- Kāmil (1218-1238) which took place in Damietta in June 1219, that is, eight hundred years ago. The historicity of these facts according to Arabic and Western sources is a main subject of discussion (Buffon, 2019 p. 45; Pirone, 2019 pp. 45-48). As far as concerns this encounter between two leading figures of respective fields, we must not forget the role of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. As leader of the Sixth Crusade, the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily signed a treaty with Sultan al-Kāmil in 1229 which granted him the recovery of the Holy Land without military confrontation. This is a unique case in the history of the Crusades, because a peaceful agreement was pursued by diplomacy alone (Blasone & Cardini & Ruta 2019; Kühn, 2019 p. 49; Delle Donne 2022). Beyond the various historiographical interpretations, this event marks

a milestone of Islamic-Christian dialogue that inspired even Pope Francis' magisterium. As the lecturers mentioned in the debate, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Afimad al-Tayyib, came together in Abu Dhabi to sign a document on "Human Fraternity for World peace and living together" on the 4th of February 2019. (Sandri 2019).

The conference held at Messina was also aimed at reconsidering Francis of Assisi' visit to Ayyūbid Sultan in its spiritual, theological and cultural dimensions within the realm of revealed religion. The presenters devoted special attention to Francis and al-Malik al- Kāmil as true followers of the divine Revelation according to Abrahamic belief. In particular, Dario Tomasello focused on similarities between these messengers of the Divine Wisdom, who acted according to a paradigm of the history of salvation. Both were confident in the final fulfilment of the divine promise, in conformity with which they faithfully lived. Francis was a quite familiar personage to the Sultan who identified him with examples provided by previous heroes of Islamic asceticism.

Besides conference papers, there were also artistic performances like the recital of Francis' poems and 99 God's names uttered both in Arabic and Italian translation. After this symposium, a common meal was offered by the Islamic Centre to all participants in a joyful and very friendly atmosphere. Food tasting of gourmet Arabic specialities was a further occasion of discovering Mediterranean gastronomic culture in comparison. We can remark how much Sicilian cuisine is indebted to Arab tradition (Aymard & Bresc 1975; Zarcone, 2017 p. 192).

All this ascertained, such a conference in October 2019 held under the patronage of Islamic and Christian community provided a true brotherhood and a transcultural encounter, with the result to pursue a process of mutual understanding and constant dialogue. As Zoran Matevski (2007, p. 52) remarked: "Islam and Christian are part of the Eastern faiths, but they do not exclude each other. Judaism, Christianity and Islam use different names for same God". Under this perspective, we may thereby learn to live the Mediterranean space as an area of peace on the grounds of the centuries-old meeting of cultures that cross it.

Conclusion

Finally, modules of education to peace have been variously developed and also need further to be enhanced in present times. Faced by critical, not to say explosive, situations, choices of modern-day citizens must be orientated towards the common harmony. It is necessary to critically reflect on different religious communities in historical times as well as in our days of globalization, while interdependence is stronger than ever. Sicilian paradigm may be paralleled to Western Balkans, where historical Islamic presence dates back to Ottoman rule. Multicultural modernity should not provoke fear. Anyway, it cannot be constructed by neglecting the burden of

the past. Instead of dismissing the Islamic heritage, our countries may draw inspiration from the discovery of their historical past, in order to interpret the present and invent the future. Through examining Islamic history in Mediterranean and Balkan Europe, we simultaneously look forward in order to create the conditions of peaceful coexistence between different faith groups (Matevski, 2007 pp. 54-55). Today's Macedonia suggests a cooperation founded about basic values of harmony among followers of the different monotheistic religions as a concrete reality. Macedonian model of religious pluralism applies to modern Sicily and every European country as well (Matevski, 2005; Id., 2007 pp. 52-54). Various Western European citizens are an essential part of the *Umma*, while Balkan peoples who are Islamised since many centuries are highly instructive, as pointedly stated Dario Tomasello (2003a, p. 9: «La società europea nella quale ci troviamo non può contemplare l'Islam come un corpo estraneo né come un inedito ospite, ma osservando le radici della sua storia, come un fattore integrante del proprio sviluppo.»).

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