

Matter of Taste: A Sociological Analysis of the Archetypology of Food

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Abstract

The aim of this proposal is to investigate the social relationship with food (now more complex and ambivalent than ever) as a “total social fact” (Mauss, 2016) through the theoretical perspective of the sociology of the imaginary developed by Gilbert Durand.

Starting with a brief introduction defining the archetypal structure of the imaginary and its dynamic components (symbols, myths and rituals) understood as “variations” and cultural expressions of the archetype (Durand, 2013, p. 41). This paper explores the meanings attributed to food during festive practices and celebrations in which the food-sacred relationship seems to express powerful symbolic connections. It is possible to hypothesize that at the root of the current success of these peculiar moments of festive gathering and “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 2013) lies a renewed need to regain access to a “sacred time” (Eliade, 1973, pp. 48, 49). The “nocturnal” experience of *sagra*¹ offers the postmodern subject the opportunity to gratify the “perpetual and inexhaustible desire to return to the place of birth”, to its foods and related eating practices, “appeasing” the “nostalgia” that, otherwise, a departure from it can produce (Teti, 1999, p. 90). For these reasons, food festival represents the possibility of an “eternal return” (Eliade, 1959) to the place and time of one’s origins, a sensual “cult” capable of satisfying the visceral need for “sense of home” (Niola, 2022; Berzano, 2023), which makes this type of festive celebration a “re-enchanted” expression (Maffesoli, 2021a) of the archetype of the Great Mother.

Keywords: imaginary, archetype, food, *sagra*, postmodernity.

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¹ The term *sagra* derives from “sagro”, an ancient variant of the adjective “sacred”) represents an “ancient” and “religious” celebration, carried out “on the occasion of the consecration of a church, an altar or a religious image”, but also a patron saint. The term also refers to the “popular festivals” that take place in towns (especially in the hinterland), villages or districts to consecrate the harvest of a typical local food product (Treccani, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sagra/>).

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1. Introduction to the fundamental structures of imaginary and depth sociology

Analyzing society through the lens of the sociology of the imaginary means questioning the profound (symbolic and emotional) forces that nourish the social reality we inhabit. In this regard, it is important to agree on the meaning of the term “imaginary” as used in this paper.

Gilbert Durand (1999, p. 42) writes²: “The imaginary is merely the space of this dialectic whereby the representation of the object is assimilated and modeled by the drive-motivated imperatives of the subject, and reciprocally [...] subjective representations are influenced ‘by the previous adaptations of the subject’ to the objective milieu”.

With these words, Durand defines the imaginary as a more or less organized system of primary instances (archetypes) and their related “variations” as well as cultural declinations (archetypal images, symbols, myths, rituals) that inform the associated life of subjects, offering them an inexhaustible “reservoir” of meanings to draw on.

As argued by Antonio Camorrino (2024a, p. 201), the imaginary and social reality weave a relationship of perpetual “twinship” for which – according to Durand (2013, p. 38) – it is not possible to sustain the “ontological anteriority” of one reality over the other. In short, the imaginary is a reality inherent in that of social life. It is based on the archetypal image (i.e. a “inherited” image (Jung, 2023; Neumann, 1981; Vidal, 2017), that human beings express their unique ability to give meaning to reality and access another, “mysterious” dimension (Camorrino, 2024a) that Jung (2023) defines as the “collective unconscious”. Social reality is understood, in this sense, as a “splitting” of the social imaginary, the expression of an archaic and affective background “superimposed” on the material dimension with which it communicates and on which it intervenes (Morin, 2016). This will be followed by a brief theoretical introduction to the analytical perspective adopted. The author’s intention is therefore to apply these concepts to the analysis of the complex social relationship with food understood as a “total social fact” (Mauss, 2016). In other words, will be analyzed the meanings attributed to food during particular festive celebrations which today seem to be undergoing a process of progressive paganization. The aim is to understand whether: does food still retain its symbolic importance?

² It should be noted that the theoretical framework underlying this paper refers exclusively to the tradition of studies on the imaginary that draws on the work of Gilbert Durand and the Eranos circle, but above all to Carl Gustav Jung’s perspective on archetypes.

Have today's festivals retained the archetypal power of religious rituals and myths? Is it still possible to speak of the persistence of the Great Mother in the most diverse contemporary social practices related to food? This is a field of investigation in which the imaginary and the sacred express their profound interconnection. According to Massimo Montanari (2004, p. XII), human beings "create their own food" and "transform" it, "choose" it and "consume" it. "Food is culture" and as such is laden with "symbolic values", as well as nutritional and "economic" values (Montanari, 2004, p. XII), which each culture draws from those "affective-representative mould" that innervate the "deep structure" of social reality (Durand, 1999, p. 61; Secondulfo, 2019). It is therefore essential to understand, for the purposes of this analysis, the "anthropological journey" that takes place within this process of social construction and its current transformations. In this sense, the focus will be on investigating the relationship between "subjective and assimilative drives and objective intimations from the cosmic and social environment". That is to say, the focus will be on the role played by the physical and emotional spheres, "ghosts", "mysteries", fears and desires that dwell in the shadow of the human unconscious (collective and individual) (Durand, 2013, pp. 38, 62).

1. The archetype...and its "variations"

According to Gilbert Durand, the imaginary is a "relational" and "dynamic" system, more or less organized, composed of "founding instances of meaning" (Grassi, 2006, pp. 13, 14). Archetypes, images, symbols, myths and rituals that inform social reality constitute the "reservoir" from which to draw in order to express the "unconscious contents" that are still mysterious and probably never fully accessible (Bartoletti, 2023, p. 37). Archetypes – from Jung's point of view – are "innate" elements, "non-individual" and not derived from an individual's life history. Archetypes are "archaic residues" (à la Freud) contained in an ever-active affective reservoir that is structured around "primordial images" that "decide" and "pre-form" the psychic activity of every human being (Jung, 2025, p. 15). In this sense, the imagination provides a language capable of expressing these contents. As can be inferred from these initial notes, the concept of archetype will be used here in Jungian terms as " 'primordial image' ", " 'prototype' " and " 'original image' ", that is to say: the "preliminary stage" of ideas (Jung, cited in Durand, 2013, pp. 61-63). The analysis of this specific psychic component therefore allows us to identify the "deep valences" of the collective imagination and the "individual imagination", that is, a symbolic reality that allows us to establish order in human existence (Bartoletti, 2023, p. 33). Archetypes represent an unconscious force, the

“instinctive tendency” to create “individual representations” (symbolic, mythical). These representations take root from the same model (Jung, 2023, pp. 73-75). This means that in the “collective unconscious” there is an “invariant” element that can be activated at any time and in any place, independently of the interference of the external environment and individual experience. This explains the presence and permanence of archetypes, i.e. the “recurrence of similar images and types” – albeit expressed differently – in different human societies (Jung, 2025, pp. 15-17). We are dealing with the ‘universal heritage of the species’ that underlies the conscious psychic life of individuals, and the translation of this heritage into “archetypal images”. In other words, we are discussing an intangible but “only potentially present” entity that becomes perceptible and comprehensible through its cultural expressions. It should be noted, however, observes Bartoletti, that with respect to Jung’s definition, Gilbert Durand departs from the idea that the archetype derives from “mnemonic sediments” that have been transmitted along the “phylogenetic” path. Instead, the French anthropologist refers to it by identifying it as a universal original imprint. According to Jung, what is “inherited” is “not images, but an abstract possibility of representation”, i.e. the human “disposition to produce images” (Bartoletti, 2023, pp. 38, 36). Furthermore, according to the French anthropologist, the archetype represents the privileged place where the imaginary meets rationality (Durand, 2013, pp. 61-63), and the “unconscious” meets “consciousness”. To use Bartoletti’s words, it is the subjective and collective spheres of “symbolic production” that interact. These archetypal and “universal aspects of human life”, from which the psyche produces representations and images, become “accessible to consciousness” through different types of cultural expression with an increasing degree of rationalization (Bartoletti, 2023, pp. 34, 36, 41-42). In short, from Jung’s perspective, archetypes are “images integrally connected with the living individual through emotions”. To give meaning to existence, human beings draw – through symbolic and cultural production – on an “underground world” that contains “primitive features” of the “original psyche” (Jung, 2023, pp. 103, 107, 108). In this world, “archetypal structures” appear in a state of “fusion” (Neumann, 1981) while remaining unavoidable instances, “intuitive units” (Jung & Kerenyi, 2023, p. 146) and constants of the imagination with which human beings “symbolize” the experience of their being in the world (Durand, 2013). The psychic life of individuals, in whom archetypes constitute an unconscious force that is simultaneously creative and ordering, reveals itself to consciousness both on an individual level (in the form of “fantasies, dreams and delusions”) and on a collective level through “particularly powerful symbols”, myths, “religious representations and fairy tales” (Bartoletti, 2023, p. 34). However, unlike symbols, the archetype is defined only partially in its form and not at all

in its content. When the archetype is filled with content, it is already an “archetypal image”, a symbol that can be identified as such when it presents itself to the subject’s consciousness (Jung, 2025, p. 16).

Durand’s idea that the symbol is the “epiphany of a mystery” (Durand, 2012, p. 21) is well known. It is the “inexhaustible” and “ever-exceeding” expression of a “symbol” still in a potential state (Jacobi cited in Bartoletti, 2023, p. 37). When the symbol “emerges” from an archetypal model, it becomes recognizable to the spirit and visible to the consciousness (Vidal, 2017). If the archetype carries with it the “primordial unity” of opposites, the symbol, for its part, expresses and “actualizes” one or the other polarity (Jacobi cit. in Bartoletti, 2023, p. 43): it is the affective power of the totality and mystery to which the symbol gives access that determines its strength. What distinguishes the symbol from the mere sign is the “vitalizing” force it contains: the symbol always refers to something other than itself (Vidal, 2017). That is to say, in Durand’s words, if archetypes “are linked to images which differ greatly from culture to culture and in which several schemata are interwoven”, themselves “tends towards to substantification”, while symbols, place themselves on that of the “noun”. They are “grouped” contextually based on their relationship with the “world of objects” and the world of dreams. Therefore, the principle that every system of motivations harbours its own “ghosts” takes on further meaning, opening the “door to mystery” once again. However, since the symbol is “bivalent”, in order to be legitimized and to preserve its “strength”, it must guarantee the *coincidentia oppositorum* it embodies, that principle of totality that informs it. For these reasons, the archetype and the symbol are placed in a “prerational” dimension, in relation to which myth represents a first, dynamic form of “rationalization” and organization of archetypes and symbols (Durand, 1999, pp. 62, 211).

2. Food and imagery: What kind of symbolic function?

“Man does not live by bread alone” (Pace, 2008, p. 15). According to Elisabetta Moro and Marino Niola: “Both believers and non-believers’ Western imaginary is composed of the same stuff as bread”. Food is not only what feeds history, it is also “the engine of mythology.” The process of civilization has been inextricably linked to food since the discovery of fire³ which enabled humans to procure food, cultivate it, and cook it. In this sense, if the birth of agriculture marked a turning point in the history of civilization, it is in fire that we can trace its “mythical backstory”. Furthermore, Moro and Niola argue: “at

³ On this topic see Johan Goudsblom’s *Fire and Civilization*, first published in 1992.

the same time as humans began to produce fire, fire began to produce humans”, civilization, the family⁴. “By cooking their food, peoples cook themselves, modifying their nature⁵” (Moro & Niola, 2023, pp. 41, 3, 4, 5). In other words, food consumption is an act of symbolic creation (Pace, 2008, p. 15). Feeding, as we shall see, is both the most individual and the most relational gesture: it is an incorporation gesture when we bring food to our mouths, but it is also a gesture of “intimacy” and “communion” when a mother feeds her child, first in the womb and then at her breast (Durand, 2013). In this sense, food and nourishment are the basis of the isomorphism that exists between agriculture and motherhood. It is no coincidence that our culture is full of references to bread, wheat, and the cycle of seeding. Nor is it a coincidence that “agricultural activities” are spontaneously associated with the values of “naturalness” and “originality”. It is no coincidence that we perceive these activities as “archaic” and “traditional,” and that there has been a shift from the ancient perception that agriculture marked the entry into civilized society, or the emergence of humans from a state of savagery. The symbolic significance of this process - a set of “civilization,” “domestication” and detachment from Nature promoted by “hunting and gathering” and “know-how” – has come down to us through the transmission of myths that tell of a “Mother Earth wounded by the plow” and compensatory rites, the “fertility rituals” celebrated to “atone for the guilt” of the violence committed (Montanari, 2004, pp. 6, 7). It then becomes clear that the relationship with food, whether on an individual or collective level, presupposes emotional, moral, and cultural choices in each case (Montanari, 2004; Douglas, 2021) from which it is possible to deduce the predominant archetypal structure and, together with it, the constellation of symbols, myths, and ritual practices that take shape around laid tables, during collective ceremonies, religious (or pagan) festivals, rites of passage, etc. The imaginal force of food lies in its ability to build a “bridge” “between interiority and exteriority”, “between human beings and the cosmos”, “between spirit and

⁴ In Greek mythology, the birth of the family is associated with the consequences of Prometheus’ theft. Having unleashed Zeus’ wrath, he created Pandora, the “first woman”, and gave her in marriage to Epimetheus (Prometheus’ “ill-timed” twin). Pandora’s arrival not only established marriage but also introduced suffering, the harshness of life, the “toil of the fields”, disease and evil into the world. For Mediterranean cultures, if bread is the first symbol of civilization that draws its origin and strength from fire, bread is also a symbol of “pietas” and “caritas”, of “solidarity” and “cohesion” that the “sourdough” has “inflated” as it “inflates the dough”. The success of leavening is the symbolic expression of the Great Mother, who, in the name of bread, brings openness to others, sharing and the exchange of a “common asset” (Moro & Niola, 2023, pp. 5, 13).

⁵ My translation from Italian.

matter”, a fundamental tool for interpreting reality. The social relationship with food, according to Grassi and Viviani, is “both rational and irrational”. Culinary and food practices activate processes of symbolic and value-based “negotiation” around which each culture builds its identity (Grassi & Viviani, 2016, pp. 46, 47). The archetypology developed by Gilbert Durand - according to Grassi and Viviani - classifies food on the basis of its “contradictory nature” (a concept dear to Durand himself), i.e. according to the capacity of this symbol to guarantee and express the integrative power produced by its “diurnal” and “nocturnal” instances (Durand, 2013).

The primary ones refer: on the one hand, to the artificial nature of cooked food, the result of a process of civilization and intellectualization that has its roots in the discovery of fire and can be observed, for example, in “performative foods” and “foods designed to be looked at,” “functional foods,” or minimalist-style “food design” (Grassi & Viviani, 2016, p. 51); on the other hand, they refer to the promise of purification, ontological elevation, and salvation of the soul, characterized by the removal (or denial, in the most extreme cases) of certain categories of traceable food. For example, this is evident in spiritualist choices that guide not only specific religious dietary practices, but also ethical-moral and/or New Age attitudes that are much more widespread today: vegetarianism and veganism (Beardsworth, 2004; Fiori & Sacchetti, 2018). As for the “nocturnal” instances (to which the last part of this reflection will be devoted), these can be observed in collective bingeing and in practices of conviviality and “communion” with others, be it food, the human alter, or the Cosmos (Grassi & Viviani, 2016, pp. 52-55). These instances are conveyed by religious and pagan festivals, by “rites of passage” such as communions and weddings, whose permanence does not yield to the weakening of religious belief (Berzano, 2023).

They become true “rites of consumption,” always accompanied by lavish banquets, “food orgies” (Cipriani, 2013, p. 102) and “dissipative” attitudes (Bataille, 2020). Although temporary and weakened, within these rites, access to the sacred occurs through the “waste” and “dilapidation” of the “useful,” which in primitive cultures opened up “total” forms of “communication through destruction” (in this sense, the potlatch is the most emblematic example) and the “creation” of a “sacred space” laden with meaning (Rella, 1992, pp. XVII-XVIII). No longer, therefore, an ultramundane sacredness capable of providing answers to the “ultimate questions” of existence (Camorrino, 2024b). Rather, it is a form of sacredness (“*sacral*”), à la Maffesoli (2022, p. 9), capable of “polluting” the whole of society: it seems to respond to the postmodern “appetite” for “mystery” and for “unspeakable”, obscure things that have remained in the shadows during modernity. In this sense, such forms of food “*dépense*” – in Bataille’s terms (Rella, 1992) – would allow subjects to access the mystery of the life/creation-death/destruction cycle activated by

them. Food-symbols would become the vehicle for this. What has just been stated would shed light, not so much on the power of the hero's cycle, which has always given meaning to rites of passage, but on the primacy of the archetype of the Great Mother, that is, on the cyclical "return" of non-distinction and "elevation". We could also say that these ritual practices ultimately show the participant the path to "compromise" (Durand, 2013). The compromise of a life experienced in line with: a) *hic at nunc* philosophy (Maffesoli, 2021a); b) the "pleasure principle" and the "immediate gratification of desires" characteristic of the "narcissistic" posture of the postmodern individual (Camorrino, 2024b; 2024c). The symbol of food, represents a variation on the archetype of the Great Mother, and thus reveals itself to be "rooted in bodies and emotions, in feelings and experienced meaning" (Bartoletti, 2023, p. 48).

3. Myth, fire... and celebration

3.1 *The myth*

Supported by the above theoretical premise, the social relationship with food will be explored in the following pages through the analysis of some mythical figures whose stories have profoundly marked Western culture. The aim of the analysis is to understand how the collective psyche communicated and took shape, expressing itself today in specific food practices and rituals. In particular, we will present some archetypal male and female "postures" towards "nourishment", embodied by the mythical figures of Cronus, Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus (Faranda, 2013). These are deities who, in the presence of "the entire cosmos," according to Kérenyi, embody the "aspects of the world". Within that "totality" opposites find "balance" and "reveal" themselves to consciousness in an immediate way. For these reasons, their "intimate structure" remains "timeless" (Jung & Kerenyi 2023, p. 156). Laura Faranda explains the archetypal and mythical roots of the social relationship with food. She argues that food "is organized in a pantheon as an element and instrument representing a polarity of masculine and feminine signs" (Faranda, 2013, p. 30). Faranda goes on to say that the "foundational" ("cannibalistic") time through myth becomes "ritual time". It's a time when eating food is seen as creating a "social order acquired in the sacred sphere, even before it's acquired in the productive customs of material culture⁶".

⁶ My translation from Italian.

Food is present in Homeric mythology as a symbol from which divine balance originally arose. In the Greek Olympus, this order was expressed through male (bulimic) and female (anorexic) attitudes towards food. The male attitude is represented by the “cannibalistic and technophagic” behaviour of a god-father with a “swollen belly” who first stole his children from the “procreative potential of the Mother Goddess”, then he ate them and subsequently gave them birth. Just look at Demeter, daughter of Cronus, victim of her father’s cannibalistic instinct, which only Zeus managed to escape; or Dionysus and Athena, respectively re-born from Zeus’s thigh and skull. This attitude of ingestion and expulsion allowed the god to restore “male supremacy”. even the food order was restored: nectar and ambrosia remained the exclusive domain of the Greek gods, while men were made to offer “meat sacrifices” as a sign of devotion. Moreover, Faranda explains, the god-father will finally “exorcise the bulimic anxiety of a body-gaster”, the latter being a symbol of both the stomach and the womb, of which Homer’s Demeter is the mythical incarnation. From this arises the “ambiguity” of a womb that “must be emptied in order to be dominated”, that is, of a mother who “submits to the principle of nurturing as a surrogate for procreation and devotes herself to exemplary abstinence”⁷. With these words, Faranda highlights the female attitude towards food (“anorexic”), according to which Demeter’s motherhood corresponds to the generative cycle of seeds. Demeter is in fact responsible for establishing a relationship of nourishment and “exclusive love” with her daughter Persephone. However, Persephone, after being seduced by a pomegranate seed, emancipated herself from Demeter, by marrying Hades, the god of the infernal world, who would later capture her and condemn her to a “cyclical return” to the underworld. This marks the beginning of periods of fertility and prosperity, as well as periods of “vegetative emptiness”. The above gives a glimpse of the archetypal structure behind the events and mythical figures of Demeter and Persephone. That is to say, a “totalizing” Great Mother who embraces everything, who “nourishes” her children (the human species) by dispensing “food and knowledge” and breathing into them the secrets of a good harvest. At the same time, Demeter is the sorrowful mother in whose name “sacred fasts and sacred food consumption” are instituted, capable of suspending her own punitive fast and devouring Pelops’ shoulder blade, only to then reconstructing it from ivory, indestructible and “incorruptible”, giving new life to a body now “heroic” (Faranda, 2013, pp. 30-36).

As Bartoletti explains: the archetype of the mother to which these divinities refer, even if through different expressions, always leads, in Jungian terms, to the bond between human beings and nature, with the “earth”, with “matter”,

⁷ My translation from Italian.

with their constitutive animality and corporeality, as well as with their passions and affectivity. The “Great Mother” is an archetype laden with “ambiguity” that carries with it the “mystery of life” and with it the “cycle of life-death-rebirth” (Bartoletti, 2023, pp. 46, 47; Secondulfo, 2026) which, in this specific case, link the divine dyad Demeter-Persephone to the cycle and practices of agriculture. To better express Demeter’s rule over the rules of food supply and use-consumption, I will use the examples provided by Kerényi, who in *Prolegomena to the Scientific Study of Mythology* (co-written with C. G. Jung) clearly highlights the link between the figures of Demeter and Persephone through some ancient “wheat stories”. In fact, some Greek festivals, recurring during the sowing season, required women to fast, reproducing Demeter’s refusal to eat because of the abduction of her daughter, who was no longer bound to her in a relationship of “exclusive” love and nourishment. This event finds its “correspondence” in the sacrifice of young pigs (or alternatively a “pregnant sow”) that the swineherd threw into a ravine in the name of a good harvest. The resonance of the myths linked to Kore in these propitiatory rites then becomes clear. That is, the isomorphism between the mother goddess and the daughter goddess and the symbols “pig and wheat” becomes explicit, expressing a “fruitful death” and a life cycle that is renewed after the condemnation-return to the earth, both of Persephone and of the sacrificed animal. In other words, Kerényi points out that: if the “mother animal”/ “animal-womb” is sacrificed in the name of Demeter, piglets are sacrificed in honour of Persephone and their remains are placed on the altar, “putrid” (like wheat) “underground”, to be reused in the propitiatory rite for sowing and harvesting (Jung & Kerényi, 2023, pp. 174, 175, 176). It is no coincidence, then, that the symbolic value of wheat, pork and wine has marked the construction of European identity: a “new food and gastronomic identity”, arising from the cultural “contamination” of the Roman (and Christian) tradition with the “barbaric” one that, since the Middle Ages, has contributed to building the identity and culinary heritage of the European side of the Mediterranean, just as, on the other side of the sea, the Islamic faith began to spread and the consumption of pork is still forbidden (Montanari, 2004, pp. 154, 155). Bread, wine and oil therefore make up the “triad” of Mediterranean culture and its culinary traditions (Moro & Niola, 2023; Montanari, 2004; Teti, 1999). These foods had strong symbolic value even before the establishment of the Abrahamic religions, for which the sacredness of these foods is what both unites and differentiates them (Pace, 2008, pp. 19-22). They are the “symbolic vehicle” (Faranda, 2013, p. 30) of the festival celebrations that will be analyzed shortly. While bread and wheat are associated with the figure of Demeter, and even more so with her daughter Persephone, who represents the seasonal cycle (the “alternation [...] between sowing and harvesting”), wine is placed under the influence of the androgynous Dionysus (Moro & Niola, 2023, p. 9).

It is in fact to the figure of Dionysus, who died and was later reborn, that we must attribute the gift of wine to humanity. As explained by Michel Maffesoli (1990 p., 190; 1993), the Greek god bestowed the drink on mortals to lighten their burdens and allow them to rejoice in banquets. Dionysus is the embodiment of “confusion”, joy and conviviality. And it is precisely his “shadow”, cast over the contemporary world, that defines peculiar expressions of the social relationship with food, as well as certain attitudes that can be observed in religious and pagan festivals. Through food, in fact, the social body is structured not only on a rational level but also on an “emotional” and “sensory” one (Corvo, 2018, p. 13). The symbolic presence of Dionysus in postmodern festive rituals would stage the “universal form” of the “divine child” who, together with Kore, responds to the tragedy of human existence through the search for eternal youth and “fullness of vitality”, which at the same time represents the search for “fullness of meaning” (Jung & Kerényi, 2023, pp. 48-49). However, this meaning will not be completed by the elevation of the “child” to the “hero” described by Jung (2023). The ambiguities and ambivalences highlighted by these mythical figures and their influence on food practices (broadly understood) find their archetypal principle in fire.

In purely imaginal terms, Maffesoli insists, with Dionysus (“arboricultural deity”), wine (territorially rooted) “needs materiality, earth, fire, sky and water” (here echoes Bachelard). In this sense, the “archetypal images” of cosmic communion, which are originally linked to the four elements, recall the potential of the sensual and fusional dimension highlighted so far, which nevertheless does not exclude the link with the realm of the sacred (Maffesoli, 1990, pp. 191-192; 1993).

3.2 The fire

Moro and Niola (2023, p. 3) have stated that fire is the “mythical precondition of civilization”. Having reached this point in the analysis, it is appropriate to clarify the significance of this expression. Let us proceed in order. The axiology of the “four elements” defined by Gaston Bachelard as “hormones of the imagination” (Bachelard cited in Durand, 2013, p. 32) leads us to an comprehension of our innate capacity for “symbolization” and “sensitivity” through which “the world of objects and the world of dreams” communicate. Although Durand uses the classification theorized by his mentor - who is acknowledged for having identified in air, earth, fire and water (“bivalent” elements) the “fundamental rule of symbolic motivation”, as well as the “ambiguity” of “earthly matter”) - he argues that this “elementary classification” is insufficient to show the “ultimate reasons that would resolve

the ambivalences”. In agreement with Jung, Durand is convinced that “symbolic meanings” correspond to “ancestral meanings”, the “hereditary symbols” that go beyond the realm of things that the consciousness of the individual has “removal” and which must, therefore, be traced back to the “elementary behaviours of the human psyche” (Durand, 2013, pp. 32, 35, 36).

Johan Goudbloom states that fire “manifests itself in light and heat”, combustion reduces the material “to ashes and smoke”; fire endlessly disintegrates everything it comes into contact with and that can be burned by it. If fed, it can continuously “generate itself” Considered by various mythologies as an “animated” force, one of the first substances at the origin of the world or even the most important gift received by humans, not without the “help of demigods” (think of Prometheus), fire – explains Goudbloom, following the lessons of Lévi-Strass – is what gave humans the opportunity to become “truly ‘human’ ” (Goudbloom, 1996, pp. VII-VIII). The identity of the human species derives in fact from its exclusive ability to “light and use fire” and “cook⁸” (Montanari, 2004, pp. 35-36). Through its mastery and inclusion in human society, which initiated the “process of civilization” (Elias, 1983), human beings became “divine [...] no longer succumbing to but rather mastering natural processes” (Montanari, 2004, pp. 35, 36). Do light and smoke, heat and ash not tell of a principle of totality written in the element of fire?

Fire’s destructive characteristics and its feeding in a cyclical manner allow us to access a symbolic meaning, full of ambivalence and expressions which, according to Durand, refer simultaneously to the “diurnal” and the “nocturnal” orders of the image. Starting from Bachelard’s theoretical legacy, Durand first distinguishes between “spiritual fire” and “sexual fire”, since his discovery is the result of that of the heat produced by the sexual act. “Spiritualization” on the one hand and “sublimation” on the other also mark the “contradictory” nature of this element (Durand, 2013, pp. 211, 212).

As for “spiritual fire”, the “diurnal order” of the image is structured around the positive nature of “verticality”, which informs the “of elevation” and the related “ascension practices”. It is the symbolism of the spiritual “climb” towards immortality, or rather, according to Eliade, the “ascent” to a new condition of “escape to a hyper- or supra-celestial place”. This symbolism is always accompanied by an “intention of purification”. However, Durand argues that the desire that drives the “warrior hero” cannot be achieved exclusively by

⁸ It is important to clarify – as Montanari himself does – that it is not possible to associate fire and cooking without exception, since it is necessary to consider as a form of “artifice” and manipulation of nature even those culinary techniques that do not involve any cooking (think of Oriental cuisine and the most famous raw fish dishes) (Montanari, 2004, pp. 37-38).

drawing his sword (the “antiphrasis”), but rather the hero can defeat his Dragon (evil, death) by resorting to “euphemization” and “compromising the sword with the bond”: i.e. by domesticating the animal rather than killing it. In Jungian terms, Durand adds, the hero who “rides” the animal, “subdues” his instincts (Durand, 2013, pp. 203, 206, 210, 212). The ascendant symbolism of purification and spiritual elevation to a higher state of transcendence is held together with the “rhythmic” symbolism of “rubbing”, whereby wood, fire and the sexual act acquire “isomorphic” meanings. In this sense, the creation of heat and the burning of wood in ancient sacrificial rites are, according to Eliade (1973), “rites of regeneration”, and fire becomes the symbol par excellence of sacrifice, as well as of the death and following rebirth (Durand, 2013, pp. 210, 409, 410, 411).

The archetype of “death-rebirth” – from Edgar Morin’s perspective – is a “universal” and permanent element of human consciousness. It imbues the “metamorphoses” of existence with meaning, activating a magical vision of the world that finds expression in sacrificial or initiatory rites. The “double” of “death-rebirth” is a “spectral image” of the human being, and this “spectre” is “autonomous”. It embodies the human and ancestral desire for “immortality” (Morin, 2016). It is therefore no coincidence that the acts of nourishment, ingestion and digestion constitute a continuous “struggle with death” exorcised – mostly by believers – through the repetition of the sign of the cross (Cipriani, 2013, p. 104), especially when the cross represents the symbol of the “totality of the world” and the “union of opposites” relevant to the constellation of images related to fire (Durand, 2013, p. 408). And it is no coincidence that fireworks accompany religious festivals, the consecration of churches and patron saints, of which festivals are today – albeit in postmodern form – the ritual expression. Eliade notes that the “erection of a fire altar [...] is equivalent to a cosmogony”, to the reproduction of the “primordial gesture” that led from Chaos to the Cosmos. Every territory conquered and organized is the “consecration”, or rather, the “repetition” of the work of the gods and a gateway from Earth to the Cosmos. In this sense, the festival could be considered the result of a rediscovered pre-modern desire to place oneself once again near the “Centre of the World” described by Eliade (1973, pp. 25, 26, 32). This time, however, the Centre is located (rather than in some “otherworldly” place) “down here” (Camorrino, 2022). As for the social relationship with food, if we follow Durand’s teachings, the ambivalence of fire can be observed in practices and functions, in gestures, rather than in the substance itself. For this reason, the “ascending pattern” is followed by that of “mystical” and “rhythmic” structures which, through “rubbing”, produce heat (preserving the erotic charge of the original act) and, through swallowing, produce alchemical “indistinction”, an “orgiastic” form of bodily experience that is activated in the

act of eating (Durand, 2013, pp. 211, 322; Maffesoli, 1990). Moro and Niola point out that the throat is in fact considered the “primordial image of all concupiscence, that insatiable passion that holds beings together by binding them to the chain of appetites”. The sin of gluttony is the “madness of the belly” (Moro & Niola, 2023, pp. 34, 35) that descends from the libidinal drive, i.e. it descends from “every creature’s desire to return to the inorganic” and conquer “eternity” through “all-encompassing” experiences. Thus Eros, the “feminine” Dionysus, can insert himself into the relationship between Cronos and Thanatos, decreeing the “infantilization” of the masculine and the “regression of the sexual to the buccal and digestive” (Durand, 2013, pp. 236, 239, 240, 241, 263; Durand, 1999, p. 207-208).

3.3 Festival and celebration: the sagra

Many “orgy cults”, according to Maffesoli, have accompanied civilisation since its early days. This “orgiastic” power is also always a “mystical” power, so the “erotic charge” of putting food in your mouth is based on a “cosmological and religious foundation” where, just as an example, Christians eat the body and drink the blood of Christ by eating and drinking holy bread and wine to connect with the Father. The meaningful presence of wine in such cults finds its *raison d’être* in the possibility it offers to free oneself from the chains of everyday life and its hardships, to access a state of “softness” which, through conviviality, encourages sociability. “Drunkenness is at the same time both a cosmic initiation (loss of self and an erotic initiation (collective aggregation)”, Maffesoli argues. This is because the meal reproduces – as mentioned – the cosmic order, experienced through patterns that vary each time, depending on the historical and social contexts in which it is set. Wine accompanies the meal in a precise manner, respecting its time, place and the “character” of the diners. Furthermore, Maffesoli insists that the materiality that substantiates wine contributes to its “erotic charge”: Dionysus as a “divinity of greenery”, often celebrated together with Demeter, expresses the “need roots” and for reconnecting with the Great Mother (the earth) (Maffesoli, 1993, pp. 135, 131, 120). In contemporary society, the archetype of the “Great Mother” who embraces and nourishes her children seems to be activated in the festive and ritual celebrations represented by the *sagra*. The latter gratify the “perpetual and inexhaustible desire to return to one’s birthplace”, to its foods and related eating practices, “appeasing” the “nostalgia” that a leaving from it can instead produce (Teti, 1999, p. 90). The festival therefore represents a sensual “cult”, generally experienced in the nighttime, which periodically offers the opportunity to reconnect with the earth and the senses. It is a cult in which, according to

Maffesoli (1990, p. 183), the “Dionysian model” is considered “the most accomplished”. Wine is, in fact, the “symbol of hidden life, of triumphant and secret youth” (Durand, 2013, p. 321), which today declares: Life is now! It is life at night. At night, the uninhibited body opens up to the possibilities revealed by the senses, to the “intimacy” of a new embrace with the earth, which is both harmony and chaos. In line with Maffesoli’s theories, Grassi and Viviani (2016, pp. 60, 62-63) explain that we are now witnessing the “rediscovery” of what was once considered “archaic”, of territory and “hedonism”, of a past that now favours “quality of time” and is devoted to “presentism” as a means of gratifying the “desire for totality”. A profound reconnection, that is, not only with the mother, but also with the ancestors with whom, through the food, we return to cohabiting the same space (Teti, 2022), with God, with the Earth, and ultimately with the cosmos. The “narcissistic” (Lasch, 2020) refusal of the postmodern subject to abandon the “uterine cradle” through the compulsive search for “all-encompassing” and “fusional” experiences, however illusory (Camorrino, 2024c) can also be observed when the patron saint’s feast day becomes a useful device for recovering and strengthening the (now worn-out) link with tradition, and for coping with the condition of disorientation through new forms of “sense of home” (Niola, 2022; Berzano, 2023). The feelings that individuals harbour for the past, according to Vito Teti (2022), cannot be dissociated from those they harbour for the present. At night, it “mysteriously resurfaces” through the consumption of food from one’s origins, that “language that can’t be hidden” and tells of a “lost world”, of memories and family traditions. Along with food, we feed on “stories, people, relationships”. From this perspective, we could say that the language of food corresponds to the ancestral language of the Great Mother. It is a language used to express the emptiness of meaning that the “nostalgia” for our origins has helped to exacerbate (Teti, 1999, p. 84). With the loss of meaning and death (traceable in today’s increasingly ritualized dissipative practices that no longer involve the use but the abuse of substances and no longer encourage communion but rather orgiastic confusion), the return to the earth revealed by participation in such cults evokes and activates “images” of the lunar cycle, that of life which corresponds to the plant cycle (Durand, 2013, pp. 321, 367). Although reduced in its sacredness, does the festival still retain a certain symbolic power? Does the symbol still open up to the dimension of mystery? From an imaginal point of view, we can observe in it the activation of: the imaginal constellation of “symbols of inversion”, the “dialectic of return”, the “euphemism” of “falling” which is transformed into “descent”. The festival represents an opportunity to return to “intimacy”, symbolized primarily by the “cup” (the “Chalice”) (Durand, 2013, p. 241). The festival seems to have undergone a process of progressive paganization. In other words, it would be one of the most varied

expressions of the process of “re-enchantment of the world” (Maffesoli, 2021a). However, what has been investigated so far would account for an erosion of “symbolic life” following the “removal” of one of the poles of the pair of opposites (which Jung had already intuited) and which today seems to characterize postmodern society. The overwhelming of the terrifying polarity by the seductive one that we are witnessing produces various forms of “discomfort of symbolic life” (Bartoletti, 2023, pp. 58-59). In other words, the “profound emotional energy” that was released by symbols in pre-modern societies has been dispersed (Jung, 2023, pp. 104-105).

4. In the abundance society: the loss of the symbol?

The great attention and interest focused on food in contemporary society concerns the “post-materialist” values of “belonging”, “self-expression” and “quality of life”, rather than the ideals of good, healthy and safe food (which nevertheless retain their legitimacy) (Inglehart cited in Neresini, 2008, p. 9). Nowadays, the social relationship with food mainly represents an “area of self-construction of identity”, a marker of belonging. But it is not only individual identity and memory that are involved. Today’s food practices and choices also affect, in a new way, collective and local identity and memories, for which “artisan knowledge”, “lost recipes” and traditional preparations are an important source of meaning. But what are the reasons for the centrality of food (even its obsession, if we think of the spread of eating disorders) in the different dimensions of social reality? The social relationship with food is imbued with conflicting feelings (euphoria, gratification, pleasure, fear, anxiety) and charged with ambivalent meanings. The latter can be recognized, for example, in the desire for emotional fulfilment achievable by the Self or in the threat of “contamination”, à la Douglas (2021), as a form of desecration of a previous state of “purity” and desecration of a value previously protected by “prohibitions” and “moral obligations”. Do symbols, myths and rituals still retain their power in a society characterized by compulsive (think of binge eating, substance abuse, binge watching, unrestrained shopping, etc.) and fast consumption society? Do they still convey the archetypal energy that operates incessantly in the “deep dimension” (Secondulfo, 2019) of social reality?

⁹ Although it has become a “ritual of consumption”, no longer exclusively established in the name of the saint (Cipriani, 2013, p. 102), the festival still retains the sacredness of its most powerful symbols: bread, wine and oil. This food “triad” consecrates the Mediterranean imaginary (Moro & Niola, 2023, p. 8) as the fire’s imaginary.

Today, we are witnessing the emergence of a renewed “need for community”, understood as an appropriate strategy for dealing with the spread of a deep feeling of “uncertainty” (Oppo et al., 2008, p. 45). The role of “aesthetic pleasure” and the “hedonistic desire” for “sophisticated taste” in the staging of good living should not be overlooked. In this sense, behind the consumerist logics that intervene in the social relationship with food lies the need to belong and to construct a stable identity that stands out and enjoys the recognition of the community (Neresini, 2008, p. 10). It is therefore no coincidence that the consumption of artisanal products and traditional flavors has become the subject of a “process of reinvention”, becoming “immediately marketable” and available for consumption “on the market of authenticity” in which, moreover, these products are (and must be) (illusorily) perceived as uncontaminated, original, “resistant to time” and to the transformations of society.

Already during the Fascist period, but even more so in the 1960s, festive occasions aimed at encouraging “local agricultural and economic development¹⁰”, as well as rural and enogastronomic tourism, became increasingly common. These events are opportunities to ‘promote’ the area, but also to bring the local population together periodically, welcoming back those who have left during the rest of the year. Today, these festive celebrations are mostly “secular” events, although “masses, processions and blessing ceremonies” continue to accompany them and participation in the ritual by individuals is more “selective”. In other words, individuals choose when to take part in the ritual celebration (Fontefrancesco, 2017, pp. 184, 185, 188), highlighting a different attitude compared to medieval tradition. The latter is nothing more than the result of the progressive delegitimization of the religious institution and the “reduction of Otherness”, which is now more evident than ever (Camorrino, 2024b). However, through the significant presence of food, it recovers the “anthropological model of the banquet”, which still characterizes the festival as a device capable of “reactivating” social bonds and extending them beyond the boundaries of just the local community (Fontefrancesco, 2017, p. 190). This is true on the one hand, but on the other, in this context too, the bond is characterized by its impermanence.

According to Byung-Chung Han, the rituality that structures a festive celebration represents a “symbolic action”, conveying the moral and cultural structure that sustains a community. Ritual produces “recognition” and guarantees the permanence of individuals’ relationship with the world around them. It “reorders time” and restores a “stable structure” to it, making it “habitable”. In this regard, the Korean researcher – according to Hannah

¹⁰ My translation from italian.

Arendt's theory – describes the present time as weakened in its symbolic dimension, the result of the consumerist logic of the “compulsion to produce” that no longer involves only objects but also their emotions. This contributes to increasing “narcissistic self-referentiality”, compromising individuals' ability to be with others. The function of the symbol as a “community medium” is also weakened by the decline in the action of “repetition” that has traditionally characterized rituals and guaranteed their intensity and the emotional and physical involvement of participants. It is repetition that holds together the past of tradition and the future in the present. Consider, for example, the dialectic between “innovation vs tradition” that drives even the most famous cooking contests and programs. As for the widespread demand for authenticity, it no longer addresses the community as a whole, but rather the self and the inner feelings (à la Taylor, cited in Han, 2021) of the “narcissistic” individual (Lasch, 2020).

“Objective forms are discarded in favour of subjective circumstances” because “rituals escape narcissistic interiority and the ego's libido cannot attach itself to them since, if it allows itself to do so, it must disregard itself. Rituals produce a distance from oneself, a transcendence from oneself” (Han, 2021, p. 17). In other words, from this perspective, today's participation in ritual celebrations, even festive ones, has lost its socializing function as a result of the emptying of the legitimacy and symbolic force of form. This emptying offers only illusory and transient possibilities for fusional and social aggregation, no longer capable of allowing access to a “higher time” and the “intensity” of an experience that opened the doors to the sacred (Han, 2021, pp. 11, 12, 15, 17, 54).

5. Conclusions

Having reached to the conclusions of this reflection, it is possible to hypothesize that the success of festive gathering and “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 2013), in which food seems to reign supreme, finds its roots in the need to reconnect with the “mythical” time of origins (mythical “eternal return”) (Eliade, 1959), capable of accompanying individuals on a “hedonistic” descent, both libidinous and digestive towards the “warmth of intimacy and the womb” of the mother. When, through the consumption of alcoholic and fermented beverages, wine “blends” with breast milk, it is then that we witness the “orgiastic and mystical reintegration” of bodies. The festivals would stage that food symbolism rich in “cosmic and cyclical images of agrarian origin” (Durand, 1999, p. 253). Although within a ritual in which postmodern individuals “summon themselves” (Camorrino, 2024b), the time of origins is

recreated (in an illusory way) and foods perceived as authentic (in taste and smell) are consumed. A reconnection with the mythical past of the ancestors is thus created. What were the needs of the “*homo religiosus*” in the pre-modern age are now the needs of the postmodern subject. He is at once thirsty for community and self-realization, thirsty for life and at the same time for non-life.

It is therefore possible to recognize the archetypal nature of the “desire” to return, through the experience of the “‘sacred time¹¹ during religious festivals, to an “uncontaminated” cosmos (Eliade, 1959, p. 21). In short, a “nostalgia” for the totality of Being, which seems to respond to the “thirst for the sacred” and meaning of the postmodern subject who suffers from the pauperization of symbolic power and finds an answer in intemperate presentism. “The innumerable gestures of consecration [...] reveal the primitive obsession with the real, digestive his thirst for being” (Eliade, 1973, p. 62; Maffesoli, 2021b; 2021a; Eliade, 1959, p. 11).

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¹¹ Eliade here refers to: “(in illo tempore, ab origine), that is, when the ritual was performed for the first time by a god, an ancestor, or a hero” (Eliade, 1959, p. 21).

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