

To Be a Valenzano

When jewellery production is local identity

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What is the basis of a local identity? Through different models and analytical approaches, the anthropological community has answered this interrogative by considering the possible sense of geographical belonging that a population may feel to the territory, and evidencing the relationship between individuals and a shared idea of community.

In this article, however, I want to display an example where the public recognition of a local identity is not justified by any principle of geographical belonging or residentiality. Instead, it is strictly linked to the participation of the individual to the local production milieu. The principal aim of this article is to assert that in the one hand, the attribution of a local identity is the recognition of a link between the individual and an imagined idea of community that embraces and is influenced by the specific socio-economic aspect of the locale; in the other, the practices concerning the individual's access socio-economic milieu influence his/her ascribability as a member of the community. Moreover whilst the very idea of imagined community (cf. Anderson 1991) identifies into a unique representation the socio-economic aspects with a depiction and some elements of the geography of the locale, the recognisability of such representation lays on few elements, which I describe as *community-marks*.

In order to achieve such task, I am going to present the case of Valenza, a small Italian city that is one of world's most prominent centres of jewellery production and that is situated about 100 km south-west from Milan.

After a theoretical premise, I begin this article describing a remarkable episode that occurred in the early stage of my fieldwork in the city: during an interview with one of my informant, he addressed a Middle-Eastern immigrant that did work in Valenza as genuine example of Valenzano, a member of Valenza's community. This attribution of local identity raised questions about the meaning of Valenzano identity. Moving from the characterization of such local identity given by my informant, I point out its non possible referability to the principle of residentiality. By expanding the scope of the analysis, it appeared that the local identity is attributed to an individual as a result of his/her participation to the local industrial network, specialized in the jewellery production, on the basis of an identitarian equation "Valenzano = goldsmith". To explaining the origins of the nexus between local identity and local industry, I examine the socio-economic transformation of the city in the last half of the century with an attention to the specialization of the local economy into the jewellery production. Thus, I point out that the equation originated from this transformation. Finally to complete my analysis, I consider the process of becoming a Valenza's goldsmith and how it underpins the practice of public recognition as a Valenzano.

A theoretical premise

The substantive *Valenzano* is an anthroponym associated with a geographical location: Valenza. All the anthroponyms, whose other examples are Dubliner, New Yorker, or Roman, refer to an individual that was born or live in a particular city. More broadly, they may also point out the existence of an intangible

general, special relationship that links a person with a city. Thus, these substantives identify and characterize an individual referring to a linkage, which is the distinguishing element that makes possible to recognize a person among the others, since it assimilates him to the ones who share the same relationship with the city.

In this sense, Valenzano defines a discrete group of people that have in common the linkage with Valenza. Even though Valenzano *per se* should etymologically refer only to a relationship based on the individual's residence in the city -even if this stay occurred in the past and does not continue in the present-, in the current use it is employed to underline a broader and more abstract relationship with the city. In particular, from an initial analysis it emerges that this substantive –and its derivative adjective- links a person not to the physical city, but to a cultural image of Valenza shared by its habitants. It transcends bonds of materiality, and embraces the physical geography of the urban area, the population and economy. It unifies all of these elements in one complex representation that is the image of the living city of Valenza. When Valenza's habitants use the word *Valenzano* to address an individual they connect this person to this image, distinguishing he/her through the implicit recognition in him/her of, what we may consider, a bland ethnicity: a set of specific features that univocally links and confirms the connection of the individual to the idea of Valenza.

The cultural dialectics between a group of people and their shared idea of the community was highlighted by Anderson in his seminal work *Imagined communities* (1991). From this work, it emerges that a group of people is able to recognize itself as a distinguished unicum, a community, on the basis of a shared idea of “nation”, which is a precise and formulary hyper-narration of the specificities of the community that links the community to a symbology and to a narration of its Past. This hyper-narration is able to bind together the members of the community through common origins, justifies the union of this group through the consistency of the narration of the past, links the nation to the political and physical geography of the territory and enforces the actions and claims of the same community or of its State.

Moving from Anderson's work, O'Rourke (2006) expanded his analytical model in her study of the identity of the local communities. She argues that not only the nations but also the local communities are determined through the sharing among their members of self-narration, on the basis of which the local identity is characterized. As she noticed in the case of the Greek village of Lehonia, the self-narration works as an ideal model for the community since it embraces not only the history of the burg but also an archetypical idea of the proper form of the local economy, social order, and eventually positive and negative socio-cultural traits that differentiate the community from the neighbours. Differently from Anderson, she also observes that there is a dialectics between such an ideal of community and the factual political, social and economic conditions of the same community: the ability of binding together the community of the self-narration is founded on its capacities to mirror, explain and justify the factuality of the local reality. Consequentially the incidental creation of a gap between the immateriality and the materiality of the community, caused by a sudden evolution of the socio-economic condition of the village as in the case of Lehonia, may bring to the dissolution of the very sense of belonging.

For the case of Valenza, even though O'Rourke did not explore how the local economy can factually work as an agent of local identification, her work is fundamental since she underlines the actual dependence of the local identity on the economic and social evolution of the local reality studied.

Other key elements for our reasoning are the considerations brought by Candea (2008) in his work on Corsican identity. Inspired by the theories by the French scholar Tarde (Candea, 2009; Tarde, 1999 [1895]), and diverging from the Anderson's approaches, he argues that the claim of a Corsican identity, which is underpinned by the feeling of belonging the land that islanders affirm, lays on an assemblage (cf. De Landa, 2006), which connects people, knowledge and things that belong to the community and its territory. For the community, this assemblage becomes an epistemological tool, which makes them able to associate persons to places and transforms a community into an extended mind (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Hutchins, 1996, 2001), which is able, for example, to collectively deal with

emergencies, such the fires around the village of Crucetta. Thus, the bedrock of the individual's sense of belonging to a community is a) to belong to this assemblage, and b) the ability to decipher the networks, which make an individual participate to the collective mind.

From the work of these scholars I moved my ethnographic analysis of Valenza, trying to make a sense of a riddle: what does it mean to be a Valenzano?

A Palestinian Valenzano

It was one of the last days of May 2009. I met Mario in front of Bar Achille in the main square of Valenza. He was a ruddy goldsmith in his forties and the owner of a small jewellery firm that inherited from his father in the early '90s. Some of my informants suggested that it could have been useful to my research if I had met him since they considered Mario "a good example" of Valenzano, an inhabitant of Valenza. Thanks to one of my friends he accepted to have a chat with me. Instead of receiving me in the office of his firm, as many other entrepreneurs did, he opted a more "informal" setting for our first interview: the veranda of one of the busiest coffee shops of Valenza.

After the greetings, I began asking something about his family and his work. He answered defining himself "proudly a Valenzano", since "it is at least three generations that my family is set in Valenza and employed in the jewellery trade". Then, he sudden stopped and hailed a Middle Eastern, thirtyish year old man that was passing along the street. The man answered and moved away. Mario turned back to me and commented: "Have you seen Ismail? A good example of a Valenzano: he is really a fine goldsmith."

Was an immigrant considered being a proper member of an Italian local community?

After that many researchers, such as Maher (1996), Dal Lago (2004), Mezzadra (2004), have noticed the presence of strong cultural tension on the themes of immigration and integration of the newcomers in Italy, which I recognized also in Valenza during the fieldwork, I was sincerely stuck by this statement. I found it quite intriguing and dissonant with my readings and lived experience. "Maybe Mario is a left activist," I guessed to myself. Thus, in order to figure out the political and cultural orientation of my informant, I decided to ask more about immigration to him, trying to figure out his opinion on this phenomenon. Besides the case of Ismail, during the rest of our interview Mario lamented the effects of immigration –"They [the immigrants] are destroying the country"-, hoped for the repatriation of all the migrants –"They have to go back. They are all troublemakers: here there is no work for them"- and eventually manifested his support to Lega Nord, a far-right party that has been the subject of some recent ethnographic studies (e.g. Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Costa Fernandes, 2009; Gold, 2003). Given such xenophobic escalation, the equation "immigrant= Valenzano" appeared even more unusual than what I expected; in particular, because I discovered some weeks later that Mario was not particularly attached to Ismail. They were just merely acquaintances, since a couple of times Mario outsourced some job to the workshop where Ismail worked, and Ismail was a Muslim, Middle Eastern immigrant arrived in Italy just few years before, did not speak a perfect Italian, leave alone the local dialect, did not consider himself Valenzano, and was not inhabiting in Valenza but just working in the city.

Why did Mario call Ismail a Valenzano? What is the meaning of being a Valenzano?

Unravelling an identity: residentiality and work.

In a research among the Baruya in Papua New Guinea, thanks the sibylline answer he received "one day by a Baruya man" (Godelier, 2010, p. 3), Godelier was able to find the peculiar traits of the local culture on the basis of which local group claims to be a distinct community. Turning my attention on the case of Valenza, Mario represented my Valenzano man who cryptically showed if not the solution of the

problem, at least, how to start my ethnographic analysis. In fact, stating that he was Valenzano since “it is at least three generations that my family is set in Valenza and employed in the jewellery trade”, he linked his Valenzano identity with two elements: a span of three generations while his family has resided in Valenza, and a three generations long experience of his family in the jewellery trade. In other words, Mario seemed to base the individual’s ascribability to a Valenzano identity on two criteria: residentiality and work.

From Mario’s words, it is, however, difficult immediately to determine the importance of each one of these criteria, their interrelationship, and the possible subordination of one to the other. My ethnographic experience, however, has offered a possible solution to this conundrum.

It is quite common in the ethnographic literature to find the residentiality is taken by the local inhabitants of any particular settlement as a fundamental requirement to recognizing an individual as a member of the local community. For example, in the introduction of her work on Bacup (UK) Edwards underlined it is not a matter of how long you stay, one has to be born into a Bacup family and bred in the village to being considered part of its community by the other local inhabitants: if he/she is not, he/she is going to be inevitably considered a stranger by the villagers (Edwards, 2000).

In some extents, Mario’s statement echoes the case of Bacup. In fact, the three generations of people living in Valenza seem to indicate the crucial importance of the residentiality linked with the idea that one must be enrooted into the Valenza’s earth through his/her ascendance to being considered a Valenzano. However, the importance of such long family history of linkage with the city was not recognized by my other informants. They did not agree on the necessity of the “three generations”. They generally reduced the time requirement to the individual’s history, since they recognized a Valenzano on the basis of the only one’s having been bred in Valenza.

In the general opinion, such a shift of importance from family history to individual upbringing in Valenza might have caused by the massive immigration that the city experienced in the last half of the XXth century, which brought about almost none in the actual population of Valenza can claim three generations of relatives born and bred there.

Whilst the change of requirement can be explained looking at the demographic evolution of the city, the importance of education as a moment of individual becoming part of the city community can be anthropologically explained considering it as a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) to the community through which one builds relationship with the other members of the group, learns and embody practices, the knowledge and the behaviours that underpin the local identity. However, the emphasis given to education for the acquisition of the local identity raises an interrogative concerning the characteristics of the same educative process, which my informants referred to.

In this respect, all of them agreed it is not the formal education that makes a Valenzano: “Yes, it is true; you could have attended a local high school but... Forget the school! It does not mean anything. [To be a Valenzano]’s not a matter of a school degree taken here or there. When I say you have to be educated in the city, I mean you have to have spent your days in Valenza. You have to have grown up here. You have had to gang with Valenzano kids when you are young. You have to have worked in Valenza for a while.” This is a quote from an interview I had with a 70 years old man, who grew up in Valenza and worked in the city for almost 50 years before the worsening of his sight obliged him to quit his activity as gem-setter. I chose this passage not only for the vivacity of the expressions used. Its crescendo about being a Valenzano and “bred” in Valenza was particularly relevant since it overtly shows that the education, which the anthroponym Valenzano is related to, is an informal process the follows the model proposed by Lave and Wegner. Moreover, the quote ends pointing out the fundamental role played by work in the *bildung* and characterization of a Valenzano. The overall relevance that work assumes in such educative process echoes and closely follows the results of a vast bibliography that has underlined the role of one’s work, from the earliest stages of the apprenticeship, as a medium for the individual’s construction of a social network and the acquisition of cultural traits.

The retired gem-setter however did not mention the importance of any particular occupation in the process of becoming a Valenzano whilst, in the initial quotation, Mario alluded to the predominance of the occupation in the jewellery trade. However, during my fieldwork, it often occurred that Valenzani explicitly associated local identity only with the employment in the jewellery trade. It emerged that to be Valenzano one must be a goldsmith, as it appears from the following episode, which I was part of in September 2009.

I was walking along via Garibaldi, the high street of Valenza, with two of my informants, both of them in their thirties; they had grown up in Valenza and employed in the city: one as a clerk in a bank, the other as a goldsmith in a Valenza's large firm. We were chatting about the upcoming jewellery fair of Valenza, which was holding at the beginning of October, when we were stopped by a friend of them that started talking with us about the city and the effects of the global economic crisis on Valenza. After about five minutes, he left us, to go back to work. I did not know him. Thus, I asked for some information to my companions. They explained he was a doctor, who has grown up and was working in Valenza. Then, knowing my interest in the discourse of Valenzano identity, the bank clerk concluded: "But I would not call him a proper Valenzano...". "Why?" I interrupted. Completing the sentence of the friend, the goldsmith answered in dialect: "*Al fa mia l'urefes!*" [He is not at all a goldsmith!]

Besides the self-presentation of Mario, already the initial case of Ismail has suggested that residentiality was not the real element for the public recognition of a Valenzano identity. The case I have just reported confirms this supposition. It appears that to be considered a Valenzano it is almost irrelevant if one actually lives and upbringing in Valenza, but it is crucial he/she is employed in the jewellery trade. In other words, the attribution of local identity lays on the identitarian equation "Valenzano = goldsmith".

The socioeconomic roots of an identity

The importance of being a goldsmith in order to be considered a Valenzano can be explained looking at the economic characterization of the city. Nowadays Valenza's economy is fundamentally based on the jewellery trade: in 2001, more than 7000 people, more than half of the entire city's workforce, was employed in the 1300, generally small, jewellery firms active in Valenza (Benzi & Fugagnoli, 2004a, 2004b). Even though, in the last decade, the number of establishments has been reduced due to the effects of the global crisis of the international jewellery market (Carcano, Catalani, & Capello, 2007; Paradiso, 2008b), still in autumn 2009, jewellery production was perceived as the very pulsing heart of the city by all my informants (see also Fontefrancesco, 2011). The cultural and economic importance, as well as the penetration that this trade had in the life and the geography of Valenza, must be considered the bases on which the identitarian equation "Valenzano=goldsmith" stands.

Although many of my informants, in particular the people under 50, considered this nexus as a characteristic of the entire history of Valenza- using their words "Valenza is and has always been the jewellery trade"-, the elder inhabitants of Valenza stressed that the identitarian equation is just a "recent" phenomenon, an effect of the economic transformation of the city in the '70s.

"You would have listened that Valenza has always been the city of gold. It's not true. Now, to the young people like you, it could sound strange, but, until the '70s, there were many shoe-making factories here and there in Valenza. At that time, none dared to say or even think 'or you are a goldsmith or you are scum'. It is in the '70s that the story changed and jewellery trade became Valenza."

According to the citation, as well as the words of other my informants, in the '70 an epochal economic change occurred in Valenza that modified the social role that the trade had in the city. By examining the history of the jewellery trade in Valenza within the economic evolution of the city, it is possible to deduce the nature of such transformation.

The history of Valenza jewellery production began in the 1848 century. At the beginning of the XXth century it was become one of the principal economies the city (Gaggio, 2007; Maggiora, 2005).

However, until the 1960s, this trade was just its second vocation. The principal one was the shoe manufacturing, which employed most of the local workforce, in particular women. The crisis of the local, high-quality shoe-manufacture started in the '50s due to the introduction of cheap mass-produced shoes into the market. In less than a decade, the inability of Valenza entrepreneurs to cope with the new contenders brought about the disappearance of shoe-making workshops from the city. In the '70s, reduced almost to zero the economic relevance of all the other kinds of industry, jewellery production emerged as the only industrial specialization of Valenza: already in 1974, Valenza was an economic pole thoroughly and only specialized in the manufacture of gold and precious stones.

Since the '70s, during the following two decades, whilst the number of firms specialized in the trade dramatically increased, the jewellery production has been the core business of the city.

The cultural importance of such trade, however, cannot be limited to the econometric evidences. In fact, since the '70s the jewellery trade became the fulcrum on which the public representation of Valenza hinged. To busting the develop of the city and limiting the socioeconomic effects of the decline of the shoe-manufacture, public and private players, such as the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce of Province of Alessandria, the local bank Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria and Valenza jewellery trade associations, in particular AOV, played an active role nationally and internationally to promote Valenza and its production through the idea the "Valenza, city of gold". This idea not only strongly connected the city to its jewellery manufacture but resulted in the superimposition of the jewellery production in the city. This piece of rhetoric persuaded the population of Valenza of its utter truth. As one my informant, a retired goldsmith, commented: "We were convinced –maybe I should say we convinced ourselves- which Valenza was inevitably the jewellery trade: nothing else, nothing more." Thus since that decade, the same Valenzano began believing that Valenza only possible economic centre and cultural specificity was the jewellery production, making the jewellery production growing in prestige and economic importance till to the point that "[...]in Valenza one has to be a goldsmith. Or you are a goldsmith or you are going to be not considered a proper Valenzano, besides you grew up there," the director of the local radio, Radio Gold once explained to me.

Thus, the transformation of the local economy in a mono-crop system (cf. Vargas-Cetina, 2000) brought about the synonymization of the attribute "Valenzano" with "goldsmith": the local identity became a matter linked with an economic datum, rather than a geographical one. Thus, to understanding what makes a man a Valenzano is necessary to look into the production milieu.

Becoming part of the network

The economic transformation of the '70s and the arrival of hundreds of new people into the jewellery trade permitted the expansion of the production milieu of Valenza.

As Gaggio well explained, from the very origin of the jewellery trade in Valenza, the production was based on the networking of the city's firms, generally workshops with less than 15 employees (Gaggio, 2007, p. 88). In such context, the entire cycle of production was fragmented among the different workshops, each one often specialized just in a phase of the manufacturing, such as the casting, the gem setting, the polishing, etc. The social and economic effect of such fragmentation combined with the hyper-specialization of the workshops was the strong economic and social interdependence of the firms: in Valenza, the success of the single enterprise was assured by its ability to collaborate with other firms, getting the job from them and accomplishing its task in the best and cheapest way.

The economic transformation occurred since the '70s and the expansion of the jewellery trade did not alter the structure of production. In fact, as Gereffi (Gereffi, 2007) and Paradiso (Paradiso, 2008a) have noticed, still in the 2000s, Valenza's production was strictly based on the networking among firms. Even the largest enterprises, such as Bulgari and Damiani, based their production on practices of outsourcing and avails themselves of the support of their sub-suppliers to design every year their new collections. Thus, as we see, the expansion of the jewellery trade coincided with the perpetuation of these past

entrepreneurial practices.

The firms' network in Valenza, as Garofoli (2004) and Gaggio noticed, is not only a productive system, but is a vast social network that connects firms and artisans through mutual bonds of collaboration. As these scholars and the goldsmiths I met affirmed, the entire production system hinges on the reputation of the single artisan in the community and trust that the other feel toward him/her, as a jewellery modeller, who was born in Alessandria and arrived to Valenza in the early '80s, remembered: "The basis of the network is not our "blood", but in the trust that bond us together!"

From Gaggio's account and my ethnographic experience, trust in Valenza is the confidence that jewellery producers feel toward another goldsmith. This feeling is based on the awareness that, in one hand, this goldsmith is technically able to carry out the assigned job and, in other, is not going to rob the precious materials or blab out any confidential information concerning the product. In fact, as Mario explained: "At the end of the day, I don't care about the colour of skin of my supplier, I just want he/she make a good job and do it at the right time. However, I need to my suppliers. I need to trust them. You wouldn't give thousands of Euros in the hands of someone you do not know or trust, even if he is your cousin."

All my informants agreed that one has to prove only his/her artistic skills and trustworthiness to become part of the network, and no other cultural elements interfere. In his interview Luigi, a retired goldsmith, explained: "Maybe to prove your skills and mature a good reputation you'll need some years to get mixed up with the jewellery production-scene but, at the end, you will be part of the network. Once you are in, you are in. Then, as far as you will act within the network: you'll be a Valenzano. It does not matter the colour of your skin or where you actually live." However, this legitimation takes time. My informants often referred to a ten years long span of time required to the individual to enter into the production network: the period necessary to a neophyte goldsmith to master his/her artistic skills and demonstrate his/her merits. At the end of this slow process of legitimization, one is publically recognized like a local goldsmith, and a proper Valenzano, besides he/she does not live in Valenza or is not born in the city or even in Italy, since he/she has matured his/her professionalism that made the person be known by other member of the community, who are the goldsmiths that work in the same establishments and in other firms of the city.

An ethnographic solution

We moved this article from an ethnographic problem: Why was Ismail called a "good example of a Valenzano"? In this article, I tried to give an answer to this question. We had passed through the deconstruction of the local identity trying to find the elements that sustain it in the eyes of its community. We have found that, in the last fifty years, the economy of the city changed and brought the jewellery industry to be the fulcrum not only of the economy but also of the very culture of the city, till to the point that in Valenza to be Valenzano means to be a goldsmith and vice versa. Thus, to explain the case of Ismail I showed the process that one has to pass through to become recognized like a goldsmith.

When I was coming to the conclusion of draft of this article I had a call from a friend, Gianni, a jewellery seller and goldsmith of Valenza that helped me a lot during my research. Discussing of the case that I presented here he concluded in the following way, which I offer you a solution, maybe, more convincing that all my reasoning:

"Do not torment yourself! After years you have been doing this job, you acquire all the knowledge and the way of doing of this profession. You have become a goldsmith. That is the model of man, the model of Valenza citizen, we have in mind. This is why your friend was called Valenzano. He "is" Valenzano, even if he does not want, just because he suits our model of being a Valenzano."

Conclusions

Turning to a final conclusion, in the ethnographic case I presented, the attribution of local identity passed through the emic identitarian equation “Valenzano=goldsmith”. This equation, by compelling the individual to be goldsmith in order to be a fully recognized member of the community, creates a correspondence between the individual’s membership and a cultural, imagined model of local community. This image identifies the physical city and its population as a unique human landscape that is characterized by only one main landmark: the jewellery trade. Thus, this industry is turned into the cultural pivot on which economy and the very local identity of the city’s community hinge.

From this case, it emerged that the local folks recognize the individual’s full membership to the local community, first of all, on the basis of the person’s ability to be identifiable with the cultural main *community-marks* which they use to identifying themselves as a community. Whilst in other localities, these *community-marks* can enumerate the individual ascendancy or the proficiency in the local dialect, in Valenza the fundamental one is connected to the city’s industrial milieu and in particular its firms’ network.

This fundamental role played by the socio-economic structure of Valenza is furthermore meaningful. First of all it confirms the importance of the impact of the economy on the community’s identitarian cultural dynamics. Besides the formal invariance along the decades of the anthroponym, also in the case of Valenza, we notice the strong relationship between self-narration of the community and the characteristics of productive milieu. Whilst O’Rourke dwelled upon the dissolution of the congregative power of the self-narration once it does not correspond anymore to the characteristics of the locale, I point out the continuous collective process of re-semanticization of the anthroponym in order to make the imaginary that it brings with correspond to the local socio-economic aspects. For example, in the case of Valenza this process brought about the transformation of the meaning of Valenzano into a synonym of “goldsmith” along with the affirmation of the jewellery industry in the city.

Finally, as Candea pointed out, the integration into a local community –that passes also through the public recognisability of the individual as embodying the local identity- is not an innate datum but lies on a legitimating process that leads the individual to be a member of a cultural assemblage. Whilst in the case of Crucetta the assemblage is not as traceable to a material counterpart as in the case of Valenza where jewellery production milieu plays this role and fixes both the cultural requirement and the process of their acquisition that are necessary to be entitled of a Valenzano identity.

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