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Women in the Sacra Corona Unita

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Introduction

This chapter contains the results of the analysis of the most important judicial sources regarding the Sacra Corona Unita from the years 1991 to 2001. From a methodological point of view, judicial material dealing with the goals of this research was selected dealing with legal proceedings involving women implicated and sentenced for crimes of mafia-type association and, in some cases, other crimes directly connected to the organization's main sectors of interest, such as drug dealing and trafficking, extortion, cigarette smuggling, gambling, and so on. A reading of the official documents to identify the most important women who have operated inside the syndicate based on their different methods, roles, and functions uncovered several cases and helped to identify similarities and recurrences along with differences and peculiarities that, in various ways, have characterized the role of women in this criminal organization; this criminal group, although similar in many aspects to other traditional mafia associations (e.g., the 'Ndrangheta and Cosa Nostra), appears to be rather recent and, from the cultural point of view, deeply anchored in modernity.

After a brief introduction to the Sacra Corona Unita, which, despite having been defined for some time now as the "Fourth Mafia," seems generally unknown to the general public, nine cases will be analyzed concerning women who have performed specific roles and functions inside this Puglia-based group.

The Sacra Corona Unita: A Historic Profile*

The Sacra Corona Unita, a syndicate born in Puglia at the beginning of the 1980s, is an example of how the strategic and organizational aspects typical of traditional mafia associations are still valid reference points for emerging criminal societies deeply embedded in modernity.

Since the late 1950s, Puglia has been a more or less stable place of residence for several individuals foreign to the local context and closely linked, through various ties, to top-level mafia organizations. At the end of the 1950s, with the

closing of the free port of Tangier—one of the main illegal trafficking centers on the Mediterranean since the end of World War II—and simplified registrations and exemptions, the large multi-national tobacco companies transferred their storage depots to ports in Holland and Yugoslavia. Most cigarette smugglers therefore abandoned the “Tyrrhenian route” in favor of the so-called “Adriatic route,” with Puglia as the main unloading point for cases of cigarettes intended for the Italian market. The absence of indigenous associations made Puglia a natural place for border crossings by clans from the Camorra and several Sicilian *mafiosi* who had the opportunity to exploit a particularly lucrative market there, substantially free from any threatening local competition (Massari, 1998; Motta, 2001).

Over the next few years, several legal measures contributed notably to altering the composition of the criminal world in Puglia. The institution of *soggiorno obbligato* (court-ordered mandatory relocation for convicted mafiosi) in just the decade from 1961 to 1972 brought 212 individuals to Puglia from so-called *aree a rischio* (“areas at risk,” or areas of traditional mafia activity) (Parliamentary Antimafia Commission, 1976). Furthermore, during the 1970s, prisons in the area became crowded with prisoners from Campania who belonged to the ranks of the Nuova Camorra Organizzata, the criminal organization created by Raffaele Cutolo (Ciconte, 1992; Sales, 1993). Many of these *Cutoliani* (followers of Cutolo) were transferred to Puglia precisely to avoid any possible expansion into the prisons of the ongoing clashes between the opposing factions of the Nuova Famiglia—led by Boss Michele Zaza, the Nuvoletta brothers, and Antonio Bardellino—and the Nuova Camorra Organizzata.

In addition, Puglia’s geographical features were of great interest for possible exploitation of its strategic potential: a particularly extensive coastal area, a territory conveniently linked to the main motor ways to Central-Northern Italy, and several mid-sized airports.

Obviously, the importance, extent, and permanence of these organizations revealed that some sort of communication and agreement existed with the local underworld that, though not organized in any stable, permanent form, still showed a knowledge of the places, people, and situations, in a word the “know-how,” necessary to establish successfully their business in an unknown territory.

The relationship between these various subjects—the “outsiders” and “natives”—continued for years in a climate of substantial harmony with no undue interference. In the end, relations with the local criminal element from Puglia were motivated by utilitarian objectives; the natives, in fact, were involved only during particularly difficult operations, and then contacts were established directly with single individuals or small groups active for some time in smuggling, an activity that, because of its nature, required a minimum of organization and, for strategic reasons, was concentrated mainly in the Brindisi area (Massari, 1998).

The first signs of change were seen when the presence of those from Campania became more substantial both inside and outside the prisons. The “Cutolian” project actually aimed at creating a vast, widespread organization across the whole area, capable of a broad recruitment process even outside his region. The *Camorristi* (members of the Camorra) immediately attempted to install themselves at the

highest levels of power inside the prison million harassing other prisoners (especially with requests for money) as well as offering membership in their organization, something that in Camorra jargon was called *legalizzazione* (“legalization”). Alongside the rather visible presence of the Camorra, the first, particularly discreet, contacts were seen with several *ndrine* from the ‘Ndrangheta in the province of Reggio Calabria particularly around Rosarno and Sinopoli (Questura di Lecce, 1988). The ‘Ndrangheta had already played an important role in the criminal career of Cutolo, who, in his day, had been “baptized” by several Calabrian *capibastone* (local underbosses) (Ciconte, 1992) and now turned growing attention to the ongoing dynamics in the nearby region. Favors had already been exchanged—in particular in the case of several kidnappings—between emerging personalities in the criminal milieu in Puglia and the main exponents of the ‘Ndrangheta from Reggio Calabria; business relationships had also been sealed by the ritual membership of several *Pugliesi* through so-called *battesimi di sangue* (“blood baptisms”) (Questura di Lecce, 1988). This web of bonds and links of various types—trust, business, ritual—would play a determining role when the Sacra Corona Unita emerged as an autonomous entity endowed with its own identity and respected in the criminal milieu.

In the meantime, the weight of the Camorra’s presence in the region became ever more pressing. Cutolo was determined to adopt a strategy of assimilation of the *Pugliesi*. Not only did he give free reign to his advance guard in prison to sound out the availability of the locals for membership in his clan, but he decided to intervene directly, promoting a series of meetings with the specific purpose of “legalizing” new bosses for Puglia: so-called *capi-zona a cielo scoperto* (loosely, “local outside bosses”). One interesting element that should be mentioned here is the presence, in at least one of these meetings, of a representative from the ‘Ndrangheta and one from Cosa Nostra, confirming the fact that the assimilation of criminal groups in Puglia—at least in this first phase—was progressing with the consent of older mafia associations. In fact, these meetings led to the creation, in 1981, of the Nuova Grande Camorra Pugliese, a formal organization particularly active in the area around Foggia, modeled after its sister organization in Campania, but with its own command hierarchy. This new association was meant to unite all the groups already active in the region and constitute an autonomous, parallel association with respect to the group in Campania, though still subject to it economically; the agreement called for the group from Puglia to give the Cutoliani around 40 or 50 percent of the proceeds from their illegal activities (Ministero dell’Interno, 1993). One can easily see how this regime of *subjection* might have created an increasingly tense climate in a very short time. Cutolo’s relentless defeats in Campania during the war between opposing Camorra families between 1982 and 1983 contributed to powerfully weakening the hegemony and prestige of the Nuova Camorra Organizzata that would, in no time, collapse completely. Precisely at this moment, the most authoritative representatives of crime in Puglia decided to act and openly show their dissatisfaction. With the help of the ‘Ndrangheta *capibastone*, they plotted a new course that would lead to the creation of a new entity, organized regionally and completely autonomous from the Camorra.

This group was created with the name *Sacra Corona Unita*, on the initiative of Giuseppe Rogoli, in Bari prison, 1 May 1983 (as written in the diary confiscated from the group's founder in prison), with the purpose of blocking attempted prison recruitment by members of the *Nuova Camorra Organizzata* and "defending" the territory of Puglia from its infiltration; it received its "legitimacy" from Rogoli's induction by the Calabresi Carmine Alvaro and Umberto Bellocco, members of the 'Ndrangheta, imprisoned with him in Porto Azzurro (Motta, 2001). In fact, as stated in the *Sacra Corona Unita*'s founding charter, discovered by investigators during a prison search, "the SCU was founded . . . with the help of honorable sponsors" (Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale dei Carabinieri, 1993); in other words, with the specific help of several representatives of organized crime in Calabria who, detained in prisons in Puglia, could watch over this new organization's formation from the beginning, recognize its legitimate status, and thus allow it to operate autonomously on the international criminal scene. The *Sacra Corona Unita*'s organizational structure, internal regulatory apparatus, and symbolic and ritual references were developed on precise indications from the 'Ndrangheta.

The deliberate, timely creation of this association for the first time offered the local underworld the chance to compete collectively in running illegal businesses and enjoy the enormous advantages derived from this. For those who decided to join and become part of the syndicate, membership was a major opportunity for social ascent and mobility within the criminal world. The creation of an alternative identity, in many ways unique and immediately recognizable, was done by deliberately appropriating a symbolic and ritual heritage that historically belonged to traditional mafia organizations in southern Italy that many felt had completely disappeared by then. Alongside the most advanced modernization processes, elements paradoxically emerged (or rather were appropriated and reworked) in Puglia from an organizational model related to secret criminal-type societies rooted in the second half of the nineteenth century. The strategic potential of this model was clearly visible ten years later when the Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia (Parliamentary Anti-mafia Commission) included criminal activity in Puglia among *traditional* forms of organized crime (Commissione Parlamentare Antimafia, 1994).

Women's Main Functions: Messengers and Money Collectors

We pause here to discuss a central element that has marked the evolution and alternating rise and fall of the Puglia syndicate from its beginnings: in prison. The *Sacra Corona Unita* was born as a criminal organization *per se*, given a unifying name, an internal regulatory code, and an overall hierarchical and organizational arrangement, all inside prison. Founding leader Giuseppe Rogoli was not only a prisoner at the time the organization was created, but also remained in prison for the entire period afterward, i.e. from the 1980s until the present. Over the course of the last fifteen years, the same fate befell the better part of the bosses and major elements of the group active in the various territories controlled by the

organization: Salento and the province of Brindisi, with some fringe groups active on the border with province of Taranto. So, prison not only made up the founding element of this new criminal group, but also the context within which, over time, the most important decisions, activities, and strategies were defined for its existence. Inevitably, prison was the main reference point for all those who continued to serve in the organization outside prison, managing the most important businesses and plotting the overall criminal strategy that guaranteed the Sacra Corona Unita's place alongside Cosa Nostra, the Camorra, and the 'Ndrangheta in the list of "traditional" criminal organizations from southern Italy.

Therefore, prison would also seem to be at the source of women's involvement in the affairs, business, and strategy of the Puglian criminal organization. In fact, their male relatives' (husbands, sons, and brothers) incarceration was the event that sparked the passage of women from a phase of acquiescence, passivity, and implicit support of their menfolk's activities to one characterized by their potential emergence from the limbo of so-called aiding and abetting to the acquisition of an active role and, with this, a certain visibility. According to the sources, most women drawn towards and inside the Sacra Corona Unita seem to act as messengers, connecting elements between an interior composed of jail, particularly the male world contained there, and an exterior represented by the criminal family, the clan, and the association in general.

The growing visibility of women inside the criminal group took shape as the direct effect of a contingent situation that, like imprisonment, was initially exceptional but, over the course of time, tended to become normalized and routine. Given their weekly meetings with relatives in prison, members regularly turned to women to deliver notes for these relatives and were later promptly informed of the results of conversations or decisions. Similar dynamics were seen during trials, in which women were almost always present in the audience, profiting from the chance to communicate with their men. In some cases, these women's homes became meeting places where matters of special interest were decided and referred later to the jailed family member.

In most cases, the role of messenger requires no special qualities other than discretion, dissemblance, and the ability to elude possible checks by security personnel. It is interesting to note that the role played by these women, although they were not proper members of the organization, they maintained a link between the two separate worlds of prison and the association that of continued communication precisely because of their activities.

However, the other function frequently performed by women in Puglia is quite different. Aside from having greater visibility, this role required special personal characteristics and represented a qualitative leap compared to the traditional role as a connection between prison and the outside. In fact, most of the women analyzed played the part of money collectors for the various activities of the organization or clan run by their male relatives (particularly drug dealing, cigarette smuggling, and extortion rackets). There is no doubt that this type of assignment brought a real change in prospects. In the first case (messenger), the function is more or less traditional and, in some cases, merely passive—that is, the woman's job stops

at memorizing and referring decisions or, simply, transporting so-called *sfoglie* (“paper scraps” or written notes). The second case (money collector) involves a different mechanism; the woman is expressly assigned the job of collecting sums of money; her role becomes explicit, so to speak, leading to recognition and legitimization of her position in the eyes of other members (though forced in some cases). She becomes a reference point for a fairly large number of people who actually manage the affairs of the organization. However, analysis of the sources suggests that this position is also related to a central condition: the absence of the man who is either in prison, a fugitive in hiding, or somehow prevented from managing his interests directly. The man’s absence is directly related and logically consequent to the woman’s temporary position.

Some Case Analyses

Several of the sources analyzed show how these two functions (messenger and money collector) were carried out by most of the women linked to mid- and high-level members of the Sacra Corona Unita. The indictment for the sentence against Ada Bevilacqua, born in Cosenza in 1939, mother of Cosimo Cinfeta from the Lecce group of the Sacra Corona Unita, states,

Who, connected by maternal ties to Cosimo Cinfeta, considered one of the bosses of the above mentioned association [the Sacra Corona Unita], allowed her home to be used for meetings of members, including fugitives, to inform imprisoned affiliates, among them her son, of criminal resolutions made by free members, and deliver “orders” from members in prison to the outside, taking advantage of meetings with her son, some of these related to the commission of several homicides . . . furthermore, receiving money from the association’s criminal activities, among them drug trafficking and illegal gambling, distributed according to directions received from her son.

A similar role was performed by Maria Rosaria Mingiano, born in Lizzanello (Lecce) in 1969, wife of Maurizio Cagnazzo, a leading member of the *famiglia leccese* (Lecce family) of the Sacra Corona Unita and presently a state witness. The sentence against her by the judge for preliminary investigations of the Court of Lecce, 20 September 1996, states that she had facilitated the activities of the Sacra Corona Unita

by acting as an intermediary between the prison and the outside and vice versa, bringing messages related to the activities and dynamics of the association and giving and receiving communications related to these during the first and second level court hearings of the trial against Maurizio Cagnazzo [her husband] and other affiliates . . . furthermore receiving money from the organization’s illegal activities, destined for Cagnazzo and other members of the same.

Some cases reveal that several of these women managed to win a certain respect in the organizational milieu, though available materials also suggest the level of this “consideration” could be traced back to their main role as the wife, daughter, or sister of important personalities inside the organization. This aspect emerges

in the case of Manuela Solazzo, born in 1970, wife of Cosimo Palma, member of the Brindisi family of the Sacra Corona Unita. Her husband is presently a state witness. She acted as a link between her husband in prison and other members who managed the group's various illegal activities. She was involved in collecting proceeds particularly from drug trafficking and cigarette smuggling. Various members held her in high regard; so much so, that they generally informed her of any plans they were making or asked her advice on certain matters so as to avoid breaking the rules of the association. The respect she enjoyed could again be traced to the fact that she represented and guaranteed a constant link with her husband, Cosimo Palma, recognized head of the group:

Keeping her up to date on planned illegal activities and asking her advice constituted a method both of keeping Palma informed about any and all developments in the life of the association, as well as reinforcing recognition of his continued supremacy within the group.

Women between Tradition and Modernity

Information from the collected court materials points toward the identification of a third female role inside the Sacra Corona Unita. Though less frequent, this role suggests several particularly interesting themes for analysis. These women are directly involved in the affairs of the family—the “blood” family as well as the criminal family. Not limited to collecting profits and distributing them based on received instructions, they manage them directly, ordering members to one activity rather than another, one use of available manpower rather than another, and strategies intended not only to increase the group's wealth, but also to strengthen the power base and internal consensus of the association. In addition to more-traditional roles, these women's duties include greater responsibility, directly linked both to illegal activities as well as the group's internal power mechanisms.

From this point of view, in some cases we seem to be witnessing the potential evolution of these women's functions; having begun their “careers” as simple messengers between a family member in prison and associates outside, later they gradually assumed more and more important assignments, moving from collecting illegal profits to coordinating and supervising the strategies of small groups, until reaching the point at which they are directly consulted in the event of conflicts between rival factions. A reading of court documents clearly shows how one of the constant preoccupations of these women is guaranteeing that the prestige and authority of their male relatives are never weakened, particularly during periods of more intense conflict.

A paradigm of this is Domenica Biondi (a.k.a. “Mimina”), born in 1952, wife of the recognized boss of the Sacra Corona Unita, Giuseppe Rogoli. The first trial in which she was involved was at the Court of Brindisi and ended in the first instance with a sentence on December 1987, reconsidered by the Court of Appeals in Lecce, March 1990. The sentence from the Court of Brindisi stated that, though seeing

very important elements . . . regarding the mafia character . . . of said association, these elements did not however appear to have that level of absolute certainty and maximum reliability required to conclude that the association with Rogoli at its head was a criminal association with the precise characteristics of a mafia-type association.

Subsequently, the judges in Brindisi sentenced Rogoli and Biondi for the crime of association as stated in Art. 416 c.p., the law regarding criminal association. This decision was later overturned by the sentence from the Appeals Court in Lecce issued on 26 March 1990, which instead recognized the mafia character of the Sacra Corona Unita and sentenced Rogoli and Biondi for the crime of mafia-type association.

Over time, the role of this woman inside the organization became more and more clearly defined; the courts confirmed this as well. According to the sentence from the Court of Assizes in Lecce on 23 May 1991,

Rogoli is therefore the guiding element of the entire structure, giving orders to all associates, either through his wife—“Mimina” from Mesagne, frequently mentioned in phone calls—or correspondence, thus maintaining continued contact and exchange of information and news.

Her main position was as a basic connecting element between her husband in prison and associates outside. Meetings between the two were chances for the leader of the Sacra Corona Unita to receive continuous updates of news from the organization and on the progress of group activities. Precisely because of her position as a link between the prison and the outside world, “Mimina” also became a reference point for members who needed to “bring news to the ‘old man’ [as members called Rogoli] and hear his decisions regarding the solutions to be adopted.” Analysis of the information delivered to her husband reveals that she “was not simply the unconscious vehicle through which information traveled, but someone who had assumed her ‘institutional’ position as an element of communication among the organization’s members.” The results of interceptions show that her function did not end with simply carrying news, but also extended to relaying information exactly and correctly through her perfect knowledge of those elements that would guarantee the communications reached their recipients “with no distortion caused by ignorance of the associated facts.” In one conversation intercepted by investigators, for example, one of the bosses from the Lecce family of the Sacra Corona Unita instructs another associate on how to transmit certain information to “Mimina” to be delivered to Rogoli, emphasizing that this entailed more than relating just the facts, but also clarifying them, stressing their seriousness, entering into detail, and revealing the background of the events so as to guarantee the message would reach the boss clearly.

In addition to playing “messenger,” Domenica Biondi also had the job of collecting the tax imposed by the Sacra Corona Unita on every case of smuggled cigarettes unloaded on the coast of Puglia, the so-called “*aggio*” or “*pensiero*” (literally a “commission” or “nice thought”). This tax, 10,000 lire (around 5 euros) for each case, was collected from the various smugglers operating along the coast of Brindisi and then delivered to her by Rogoli’s men.

Worried over insurgent conflicts within the various gangs inside the Sacra Corona Unita that could have weakened her husband's leadership, she did her utmost—according to statements from a state witness—to guarantee that Rogoli's place as leader of the entire organization was clearly evident to any enemy groups, asking one member loyal to her husband to be present at a mass trial in Brindisi accompanied by a dozen or so *ragazzi* (“boys”) so these challengers would realize her husband was not alone. This confirms Biondi's lasting active and specific role as a privileged contact for her husband, Pino Rogoli, in relationships with other members, as an essential reference point for members regarding matters of great importance and a recipient of payments imposed on smuggling activities, as well as her ability to stand in for her husband in major decisions of the organization and assume, at times autonomously, initiatives regarding the very life of the association.

The situation of Antonia Caliendo, born in Latiano (Brindisi) in 1956, wife of Salvatore Buccarella, boss of the Brindisi branch of the Sacra Corona Unita, seems similar to that of Domenica Biondi. She held a particularly active position inside the criminal group led by her husband, not limited to representing a link between the imprisoned Salvatore and his partners, but also participating directly in several of the organization's activities. Her active role emerges, for example, in collecting payments from smugglers on cases of cigarettes unloaded along the coast of Puglia. She was directly involved in managing this money, asking members for explanations and continuous updates on who had or had not paid. Always present at trials involving her husband, Antonia regularly acted as an intermediary in communicating messages regarding events of particular interest to the organization and informed other members of arrangements made by her husband.

When conflicts emerged between Salvatore Buccarella's group and a rival gang in late 1998, she intervened directly in the matter. Intent on safeguarding the interests of her husband and his group and keeping his charismatic leadership intact, she reprimanded the opposing parties on their hostile attitude toward her husband and bitterly reproached them for their missed payments to the association. In this case again, her involvement in the activities of her husband's criminal family “gradually grew over time, as connections became more difficult between Buccarella and the other members and conflicts progressively increased with other groups who tended to no longer recognize Buccarella's supremacy inside the organization.” From this point of view, many analogous elements exist with the role played by Domenica Biondi, since both these women seem to have acquired greater decisional autonomy specifically during periods of crisis for the organization and the decline of their husbands' influence within the association's inner workings.

On this point, another outstanding character emerges from the analysis of court documents: Maria Rosaria Buccarella, born 1955 in Brindisi, sister of Salvatore Buccarella, leader of the Brindisi family of the Sacra Corona Unita. The sentence against Maria Rosaria Buccarella and others states that she was part of the Sacra Corona Unita,

maintaining systematic contacts with Salvatore Buccarella, a prisoner and top-level representative of the organization . . . participating in the planning of criminal strategies and decisions regarding the group's projects, receiving instructions and orders from Salvatore Buccarella intended for members of the group directed by him, providing for delivery of the same as well as keeping Salvatore Buccarella constantly informed of the organization's affairs, providing for the collection of considerable sums of money from organization members (money destined for Salvatore Buccarella and other top representatives of the Sacra Corona Unita) originating from the organization's various criminal activities such as, among other things, cigarette smuggling, drug trafficking, and extortion rackets.

According to the sentence, the arrest of Salvatore Buccarella, the elimination of numerous affiliates who occupied important roles inside the Brindisi family, and the escape abroad or incarceration of others had "created a vacuum in the delicate organizational and managerial profile of the syndicate, a vacuum subsequently filled due specifically to activities carried out by Maria Rosaria Buccarella and Cosimo Nigro [her son]." Despite the fact that testimony from *pentiti* never indicated the existence of any formal membership of Maria Rosaria in the clan, "the many precise acquisitions from investigators give evidence, however, of a coherent, stable, and effective participation" in the activities of the criminal organization. Statements from several state witnesses asserted that she in fact collected sums of money from illegal activities, took steps to manage it and divide it with the other associates, and relayed orders, information, and instructions on behalf of her brother in prison. They particularly underlined

her complete control in managing activities on behalf of her brother and above all her effective and complete leadership in the criminal context as deduced from her perfect knowledge of all supporters and affiliates, their conduct, the criminal reasoning frequently aimed at punishing anyone who might *sgarrare* ("get out of line"), including their possible elimination.

Here role was recognized as one of preeminence within the organization:

The content of many interceptions and especially her requests to others regarding physically eliminating the relatives of *pentiti*, in addition to the collection and management of profits from illegal trafficking, are all circumstances that would define her as a leading personality in the clan and simultaneously lead to a highly negative judgment of her as a person.

Women's entry into business positions connected to management of the group's illegal activities and their progressive involvement in decision-making also seem to correspond to the emergence of some primitive characteristics of archaic-type behaviour models. This is the case with their incitement to *vendetta*, support for bloody practices aimed at resolving even unimportant conflicts or quarrels, extreme familiarity in handling weapons and instruments of destruction, and encouragement of violent forms of reprisals and deceit.

As in the previous cases, different shades are present here again, and the identification of several principal characteristics must be considered more in *ideal-typical* than absolute terms; in concrete cases, this frequently leads to a mix between profoundly different operative modalities and types. For example, there is the case of Ornella Tomasi, born in Squinzano (Lecce) in 1961, wife of Gianni Tornese,

member of the Sacra Corona Unita—a cross-reference between the various dominant groups of the Sacra Corona Unita in Lecce—presently a state witness. The sentence handed down against her by the judge for the preliminary investigation at the Court of Lecce, 27 September 1996, states that she had facilitated the activities of the Sacra Corona Unita

by supplying logistical support to members who systematically frequented her home, sustaining and helping them (before and after the commission of serious crimes, especially murders), and fugitives of the association, collaborating in hiding weapons, drugs, evidence, and traces of crimes, even personally taking care of eliminating them.

Another interesting case is that of Paola Altamura, born in Taranto in 1938, mother of the Appeso brothers, major representatives of the Taranto family of the same name. In the sentence against Massimo Appeso and seventy others pronounced by the Court of Assizes in Taranto, 12 July 1996, she was sentenced to sixteen years, nine months in prison for having been a part of the mafia association called the “Appeso clan,” organized for the purpose of drug dealing, racketeering, and crimes related to hiding drugs and weapons. The judicial materials examined show—as emphasized by the judges—“the figure of a determined, bloodthirsty woman, actively involved first hand in the world of crime.” This mother of sixteen children, almost all of them involved in criminal activities, participated in extortion rackets, decided on arms purchases—distributing them, if necessary, to members who needed them—and was involved in packaging and dealing drugs sold by the clan. Furthermore, the sentence also shows how the woman frequently fomented members’ hatred of a rival clan—guilty of attempting to evict the Appeso gang from their neighborhood of La Salinella in Taranto, where they exercised their rule—and directed one of her sons—the recognized boss of the family—to choose those she felt were most reliable for drug dealing, insisting on “the removal of those who showed themselves not suitable for carrying out this job.” Her role as “mediator” between top clan bosses and the membership base seems to have been confirmed by frequent contacts with partners who turned to her “to report on criminal activities and communicate with clan bosses Gino and Nicola Appeso.”

An especially interesting case because of the presence of a perfect mix between profoundly modern, business-oriented characteristics and behavior of a markedly archaic origin is that of Anna Addolorata De Matteis Cataldo, nicknamed “Anna Morte” (“Anna Death”), born in Parabita (Lecce) in 1962, wife of Luigi Giannelli, major representative of the family of the same name from the Sacra Corona Unita operating in the southern part of Salento. In the sentence against Leo Manco and others pronounced on 19 June 1998 by the Court of Assizes in Lecce, she, along with her husband, was sentenced to life imprisonment for having ordered the killing of a man (affiliated with the Giannelli clan)

with premeditation and for despicable motives connected to conflicts for supremacy in the criminal underworld and control of the territory for the management of illegal activities, with the purpose of facilitating the association to which they belonged and in particular affirming their monopolistic control of the illegal drug market.

The victim was led to an isolated area and killed with several shots from a Kalashnikov.

Subsequently, she was also sentenced to life imprisonment for having instigated the murder of Paola Rizzello; during this ambush, her two-year-old daughter Angelica happened to be with her mother and was also killed. The victim had been accused of having certain information regarding the responsibility of Luigi Giannelli—“Anna Death’s” husband—for a murder and was also punished for having had a sentimental relationship with him in the past. The body of the woman was burned and thrown into a cistern near a country house. The child’s tiny body was buried and discovered eight years after the crime. A particularly interesting profile emerges from statements of state witnesses. In addition to representing a link between her husband in prison and members operating in various illegal markets, she seems to have held a managerial role inside the organization, though again tied to the power wielded by her husband, recognized boss of the clan. In fact, she was the one who informed her husband of the *sgarri* (“screw-ups”) by certain members who attempted to manage certain criminal activities, such as drug dealing, for example, on their own in areas controlled by the clan. She was the one who put certain associates to the test who were considered unreliable by the rest of the group because of their frequent drug use. On this point, several interesting messages were intercepted by investigators during the course of a meeting between her and her husband, incarcerated in Cuneo. With the intent of discrediting the statements of a state witness who was supplying valuable information on the involvement of her husband’s group in numerous illegal activities and with the aim of creating respect for her husband—in the eyes of the judges—as someone completely uninvolved with these facts, “Anna Death” informed her husband of the defensive strategy she would put into play:

Listen, then if they know something and they ask me . . . You consider my husband a boss, right? You consider me the wife of a boss, so would a boss’ wife, in your opinion, be stupid enough to trust some fucked-up junkie; do you really think?

Recently, she was sentenced again by the Court of Assizes in Lecce to another long jail term (twenty-two years) for participation in a mafia-type criminal association, organized drug trafficking, and complicity, as an accessory before the fact, in acts of extortion, in particular for having had an explosive device attached to a shopkeeper’s door to force him to pay huge amounts of money and allow merchandise to be taken without being paid for. Precise information emerged from this sentence that confirms this woman’s leadership position in managing the activities of the mafia clan marked by her husband’s surname. “Anna Death” was involved in all the group’s illegal affairs, maintained contacts and relationships with suppliers of heroin and cocaine who had direct relations exclusively with her, gave instructions to associates on methods to be used to collect money paid by racketeering victims and the destination of these proceeds along with money from drug trafficking, and gave orders regarding the amounts of money to be given to associates in prison and their family members as economic support to increase the internal “solidarity” of the association.

Two other women were convicted in this same sentence for crimes of participation in a mafia-type criminal association for the purpose of drug trafficking: Addolorata Carangelo, born in Taurisano in 1952, and Luciana Scarlino, born in Casarano in 1968, respectively wife and daughter of Giuseppe Scarlino (clan boss together with Luigi Giannelli), who shared the same leadership position as Anna Addolorata De Matteis Cataldo in the Giannelli–Scarlino group. The sources give further confirmation of the substitute role assumed by these women because of their husbands' imprisonment, as has been said, the event that sparked women's passage to an active phase of direct participation in the association's criminal activities—innovative with respect to the “traditional” phase—and their ability in managing those activities, indicated by autonomous decision-making and power of initiative that characterized their presence on the criminal scene in primary roles, which they performed well with no difficulties or hardships.

Closing Considerations

From the analysis of the nine cases selected, several comments can be made on the role of women inside the Sacra Corona Unita:

- The absence of the man—because he is in prison, a fugitive, or finds it impossible to circulate freely in his own territory—in most cases is the essential circumstance in establishing those conditions that make the emergence of clear functions possible and an active role by the woman inside the criminal universe of reference.
- Therefore, the woman's assumption of specific roles and functions inside the criminal group can be traced, in most cases, to a situation that, with the continuation of the man's absence, tends to take on characteristics of normalcy and become routine.
- Available data do not currently allow an evaluation of whether the woman's role tends later to become institutionalized with the passing of time; on this point, it would be interesting to see what happens when the man returns from prison and is therefore able to perform his duties.
- The analysis undertaken here indicates the presence of particular female roles (or perhaps more appropriately *functions* performed by women) inside the Sacra Corona Unita:
 1. The *messenger*, who is the link between prison and the outside world and is occupied with bringing messages to the imprisoned family member.
 2. The *money collector*, who collects the sums of money from the criminal group's various activities and redistributes it to various associates, depending on the circumstances.
 3. The *administrator*, who manages certain illegal activities or determined sectors of the criminal market.
 4. The *consigliera* (female “*consigliere*” or “councillor”), who is usually asked her opinion or point of view on issues connected, for example, to ongoing

conflicts with rival gangs, settling accounts within the same clan, distribution of power within a family, and so on.

- It should be kept in mind that these female roles assume an *ideal-typical* value because in reality we see a mixing of characteristics, roles, and functions.
- One aspect that created particular interest in the course of this analysis was the existence of a profound integration between characteristics, roles, and functions deeply anchored both in modernity and archaic, primitive-type behavioural models extolling the vendetta, the feud, and bloody violence. Coinciding precisely with the most advanced processes of modernization that gave birth to the Sacra Corona Unita we witness the emergence of the most archaic characteristics. From this point of view, tradition and modernity seem to coexist here perfectly.

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