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SAM MIGLIORE

*Religious Symbols and Cultural Identity:  
A Sicilian-Canadian Example*

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Ethnic affiliation continues to persist in Canada because the members of different ethnic minority groups have devised various techniques for maintaining their ethnic and cultural identity. In this paper, I examine the specific techniques that Sicilian-Canadian residents of Hamilton, Ontario have developed to identify themselves as part of a particular ethnic community. Of particular importance in this discussion is the role of religious symbols in the process of in-group identification. More specifically, the use of religious symbols allows people to express their cultural identity and thereby identify themselves as Sicilian-Canadians.

L'appartenance ethnique persiste continuellement au Canada parce que les membres de différents groupes ethniques minoritaires ont imaginé des techniques variées pour maintenir leur identité ethnique et culturelle. Dans le présent article l'auteur étudie les techniques singulières que les canadiens-siciliens, habitant la ville d'Hamilton, en Ontario, ont mises en oeuvre pour s'identifier au sein d'une communauté ethnique particulière. D'une importance toute particulière, dans cette discussion, est le rôle que jouent les symboles religieux dans le procédé d'identification au sein du groupe. Plus précisément, l'usage de symboles religieux permet aux individus d'exprimer leur identité culturelle et, par suite, de s'identifier eux-mêmes comme canadiens-siciliens.

**Introduction**

In the process of adjusting to life in Canada, the members of various ethnic groups have consciously and unconsciously attempted to maintain their cultural identity. A review of scholarly literature indicates that this has been accomplished in a variety of ways. The specific techniques range from the development and maintenance of a very high degree of institutional completeness, as in the case of the Hutterites, to the display of symbolic attachment to one's roots (e.g., Boldt 1985; Breton 1964; Driedger and Church 1974; Elliott 1983; Jansen 1978; Radecki 1976 & 1979). In this paper, I shall examine how Sicilian-Canadians residing in Hamilton, Ontario are attempting to maintain their cultural identity. I will focus specifically on: (1) institutional completeness; (2) the establishment of official "twin-city" relations between Hamilton and the Sicilian community of Racalmuto; and, (3) the role of a particular religious feast, the *Feast of the Madonna del Monte*. This feast serves as a key symbol in the process of helping individuals maintain strong sentiments towards their native or ancestral community in Sicily. Members of this ethnic community estimate that approxi-

mately 10,000 Sicilian-Canadians reside in Hamilton, and that at least 95% of these people were either born in, or can trace their ancestry to, Racalmuto.

### Theoretical and Methodological Issues

According to Raymond Breton (1964), individuals are more likely to maintain their ethnic/cultural identity if their ethnic community is capable of providing a relatively high degree of "institutional completeness." The degree of institutional completeness refers to the extent to which the ethnic group has developed formal structures and organizations to serve the needs of its members. Breton argues that the presence of formal organizations within the ethnic community helps keep the social relations of immigrants within its social boundaries. In this sense, high institutional completeness tends to heighten the group's awareness of ethnic and cultural identity.

No ethnic minority group in Canada has "institutional completeness." All ethnic minority groups, at some level or another, are open to various influences from the dominant society. The degree of *openness*, however, varies from one ethnic group to another. The Hutterites, due to their communal lifestyle, have developed the greatest sense of institutional completeness among Canada's minority ethnic groups. Although Sicilian-Canadians have not accomplished the same degree of institutional completeness as that of the Hutterites, they have nonetheless developed various formal structures and organizations. In other words Sicilian-Canadians have, over the years, developed a degree of institutional completeness which serves as a structural basis for helping individuals maintain their ethnic and cultural identity.

The maintenance of ethnic and cultural identity, however, is not solely dependent on structural phenomena. Various studies indicate that ethnicity depends to a large extent on how people identify themselves, and/or are identified by others (Barth 1969; Boldt 1985; Gans 1979; Isajiw 1985; Shibutani and Kwan 1965). Barth (1969: 10), for example, states that "ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people." It is through the process of on-going social interaction that people create, define, maintain, re-define, and change the ethnic boundaries that separate the "we" group from the "they" group(s). From this point of view, individuals make use of various key *symbols* to express their cultural identity and to identify themselves as members of a particular ethnic group.

In this paper, I argue that for the Racalmutese of Hamilton the maintenance of ethnic and cultural identity is, at least in part, associated with the presence of a degree of institutional completeness. There are various formal organizations that serve the specific needs of individual members of this community. On its own, however, the notion of "institutional completeness" is insufficient to explain the persistence of ethnic affiliation within the Racalmutese community. Ethnic affiliation persists because people continue to identify themselves as Sicilian-Canadians, and make use of key religious symbols to express their cultural identity.

For the purposes of this paper I define ethnic identity as an individual's identification and affiliation with a particular ethnic group. In contrast, cultural identity deals with the "meaning" behind ethnic identity. It refers, for example, to

what it means to be a Sicilian-Canadian and, more specifically, what it means to be a Sicilian-Canadian whose roots can be traced to Racalmuto.

### Methodology

During the last ten years, I have conducted periodic field research among Sicilian-Canadians residing in the Hamilton-Wentworth region of Southern Ontario. The initial research involved conversations and unstructured interviews with four different Racalmutese families. In time, however, it was possible for me to move along both kinship and friendship networks to obtain additional information. The ethnographic data I will present and discuss was obtained through: participant observation; conversations with various members of the Sicilian-Canadian community; and, extended, open-ended interviews with key informants. In certain cases, unless otherwise marked, the historical data concerning the Racalmutese community in Hamilton was also obtained from some of the older and more knowledgeable members of the group.

In addition, I have spent some time in Racalmuto and its environs. While in Racalmuto I was able to observe and participate in the religious feast of the *Madonna del Monte*, and to collect other relevant background information. The description and discussion of the *Feast of the Madonna del Monte* is based on both personal observations and statements collected from various informants.

### From Racalmuto to Hamilton: The Historical Background

Racalmuto is a small city located in south-central Sicily, Italy. Its name derives from the North African term *Rahal Maut*, meaning dead village. Modern day Racalmuto originated as a Moslem town in the 9th century A.D. (Martorana 1982; Messina 1969). The Moslems of North Africa named the town *Rahal Maut*, because it was built near the ruins of an ancient archaeological site. This site probably dates back to the Sican period in Sicilian history. The Sicans were the people who occupied central Sicily prior to the arrival of the Greeks at approximately 750 B.C. (Brea 1966; Finley 1979).

Sicily, the land where Ulysses first encountered the mythical Cyclops, is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Its strategic location has attracted foreign invaders for thousands of years. Until very recently, Sicilian history has been characterized by successive waves of foreign invasion and domination. With the arrival of the Greeks in the 8th century B.C. much of the island became Hellenized. Since that time, Sicily has come under the control or influence of various peoples; including: Carthaginians; Romans; Vandals; Moslems; Normans; Spaniards; Austrians; and, more recently mainland Italians (Ahmad 1975; Finley 1979; Mack Smith 1968a & 1968b). Sicily officially became an integral part of the newly united Italian state in 1861.

The extended period of foreign domination and exploitation created various social and economic problems for the region. This state of affairs reached severe proportions during the Italian unification period (Lopreato 1967). The economic policies of the new government favored the northern regions of Italy; thus unification did not improve conditions in the south. In response to these adverse economic and social conditions, many Sicilians chose out-migration. Initially people migrated to northern Italy and the other European countries. By 1900, the pattern changed and Sicilians began to travel to overseas destinations such as

Argentina, Brazil, Canada, and the United States. John C. Weaver (1977: 10) estimates that "... between 1900 and 1910 roughly two million southern Italians ... " emigrated, permanently or temporarily, to overseas destinations. It is ironic that the land which attracted so many foreign invaders was now sending its own people to foreign lands.

Although Canada received only a small portion of this mass exodus, it was sufficient to increase the number of Italians living in Canada, including both Italian-born and individuals of Italian ethnic origin, from a low of 10,834 in 1901 (Statistics Canada 1902) to a total of 45,411 by 1911 (Statistics Canada 1913). The Italian community in Hamilton may have numbered approximately 1,500 in 1910 (Weaver 1977: 11). This population grew very slowly during the time between the two great wars. The major wave of Italian immigration to Canada occurred after the Second World War. By 1961 the number of Italians residing in Canada increased to 450,351 (Statistics Canada 1962). Hamilton, with its wealth of industries, attracted many of these post-war immigrants. The Italian population in Hamilton increased from 6,294 in 1941 to roughly 23,200 in 1961 (Roncari 1977: 21-22), and has gradually increased since that time. The 1981 census figures indicate that 41,335 individuals of Italian ethnic background reside in Hamilton (Statistics Canada 1984). Although Canadian census figures do not distinguish between people from different regions of Italy, I estimate, based on conversations with members of the ethnic community, that more than 10,000 Sicilian-Canadians (the large majority of whom are Racalmutese) currently reside in the city.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Racalmutese in Hamilton: Institutional Completeness**

It is difficult to determine why certain Racalmutese choose to emigrate to Canada, and to specifically settle in Hamilton, at the turn of the century. Some of the older people, however, remember hearing stories about relatives who originally emigrated to New York state but, due to a variety of factors, later came to Hamilton to work on the harbour construction project and in the railway bar rolling mills. These initial emigrants provided the necessary catalyst to attract others. Through correspondence with friends and relatives in Hamilton, many Racalmutese became aware of the potential economic benefits of living in this country. The people who had already established themselves in the city sponsored and assisted other Racalmutese wishing to emigrate to Hamilton.

Within a relatively short period of time, a little Italy was established in the northwest section of the city. The focal point of this community was a small chapel attached to St. Mary's Cathedral. It was from this chapel that Father Bonomi, of the Missionary Fathers of St. Charles, began to provide various services for Italian-speaking people in 1908 (Anon. 1972). In fact, it was due, at least in part, to Father Bonomi's encouragement that many Italians, including Racalmutese, went on to successfully complete a higher education and achieve various professional career goals. By 1922, the population had increased to such an extent that a separate Roman Catholic Church was established for the Italian community—a community that was largely Racalmutese. Some of the older Racalmutese report that each Italian family contributed one dollar per month, when the average wage rate was 8-10 cents per hour, to help construct the church. The Racalmutese, who also contributed to a statue of the Madonna for the church, wanted the structure to be named after the main church in Racalmuto—

the *Chiesa de Maria SS. del Monte*—but this was opposed by some of the other Italians in the community. It seems that each Italian faction had its own suggestion as to what the church should be named. Father Bonomi resolved the conflict by naming it *Our Lady of All Souls Church*. Construction began in 1922, and the church was officially opened on October 21, 1923 (Anon. 1972). Sig. Giuseppe Agro, the Racalmutese artist who emigrated to Hamilton in the late 1940s, created the beautiful paintings that can now be found in this church.

Although the Racalmutese are today distributed throughout the Hamilton-Wentworth region, *Our Lady of All Souls Church* still serves as the focal point of the Racalmutese community. Many Italians still live in this area of the city, which contains the various Sicilian recreational clubs and associations, and many Racalmutese-owned shops and small businesses.

Today, the Racalmutese are well established and settled in Hamilton. This of course was not always the case. As immigrants they left their homes and families in the hope of improving their socio-economic situation, and providing a better future for their children. When they arrived, however, they (as well as immigrants from other nations) were faced with adjusting to a totally new social environment. The Racalmutese soon found that they had to learn a new language, and adjust to new customs, beliefs, and values. Some of these adjustments were made very quickly. In fact people sometimes joke about their initial experiences in Canada; an adult Racalmutese, for example, related the following experiences to me:

I came to Canada, with my parents, when I was about six years old. That was back in the 1950s. We came by ship, and my mother and I were seasick part of the time. One of the things that sticks out in my mind has to do with the train trip from Halifax to Hamilton. On the train I had my first experience with sliced white bread. The bread looked good, but it tasted terrible. It was like chewing gum. I was used to eating hard crust homemade bread. I also remember the time my mother made her first trip to a large grocery store. She bought different things, including a bottle of what she thought was tomato sauce. After preparing the spaghetti she put some of this sauce on top. Well, no one could eat it. It wasn't tomato sauce, it was ketchup.

Certain adjustments—such as learning the language, taking jobs that called for the learning of new skills, and coping with various insecurities and loneliness—were much more difficult to make. In order to ease some of the financial/employment insecurities, the Racalmutese organized a mutual-aid society—the *Mutuo Soccorso*—in 1918. Monetary contributions were collected each month. These contributions were later redistributed to members who fell on hard times. The society, for example, provided members with sick benefits, and helped pay the funeral expenses of those who had died. The mutual-aid society was particularly important during the Depression years when it was difficult to find or maintain employment, and people often had to make do with very little. Conditions improved after World War II, but the new Racalmutese arriving in Canada still faced various hardships.

One individual describes his early experiences in Canada in this way:

I came to Canada in 1950. After nine days on board ship, half of

which I was seasick, I landed in Halifax. It took another three days to travel by train to Hamilton. Once in Hamilton, I lived in the attic of a relative's home. It took about a month for me to find work. My first job was as a farm laborer, making \$22.50 for each five and a half days of preparing soil for the planting of strawberries. There was nowhere else to work. With this money I had to pay "room and board" plus support my wife and daughter who were still in Sicily. Later, I worked at odd jobs, a day here and a day there—mostly for construction outfits at 90 cents per hour. I just couldn't find steady work. It was lonely here, but I saved enough money to bring my wife and daughter to Hamilton, and later other relatives. Finally in 1955 I got a break; Stelco hired me and that's where I worked until a few years ago when I retired.

Over the years, the Racalmutese have not only made various adjustments to the new social environment, but they have also been able to preserve many of their own cultural traditions. They have done this in a number of ways. First, the Racalmutese in Hamilton have kept a close rapport with friends and relatives in Sicily. Second, they have reconstructed, and continue to engage in, a number of traditional Sicilian pastimes. Some of the older men, for example, walk up and down James St. North, occasionally visiting Sicilian cafes or clubs in much the same way they did in the piazza of Racalmuto. Associations such as the parish-based *Madre Cristiani* (Christian Women's League), the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* (Racalmutese Brotherhood), and the *Trinacria Sports Club* provide members with an opportunity to take part in both traditional and new activities (Migliore 1980). Third, certain key religious and cultural events have been organized to promote or express strong sentiments towards Racalmuto.

Raymond Breton (1964), as mentioned earlier, stresses that it is necessary for an ethnic community to develop a relatively high degree of "institutional completeness" in order to help its members maintain their ethnic identity. The Racalmutese community in Hamilton has achieved a degree of institutional completeness; the following formal structures and organizations provide various services for members of the community:

*Our Lady of All Souls Church.* As mentioned in the previous discussion All Souls Parish is the focal point of the community. Many Racalmutese, including some who no longer reside in the vicinity of the church, officially belong to the parish. Although others may now be officially registered with the various Roman Catholic parishes in the city, they often continue to attend certain services or activities at All Souls church. This is the place that they can celebrate the *mass* in the Italian language, meet friends, and participate in more traditional Sicilian religious activities. Many of the Racalmutese women also belong to the parish-based *Madre Cristiani* association.

In addition, a member of the Italian Consulate holds regular office hours in the church rectory. The Racalmutese often make use of this service. Many of the elderly people, for example, take advantage of this service to apply for Italian pensions and obtain various types of information.

*Mutual-Aid Societies.* In addition to its agricultural production, Racalmuto was an important salt and sulphur mining centre during the 19th century. The conditions in the mines, however, were often deplorable (Messana 1969: 307-



3150. In response to this situation, Racalmutese workers established a mutual-aid society known as the *Societa Di Muto Soccorso* in 1873. The aim of the society was to provide both moral and material support for its members (*Societa Di Mutuo Soccorso* 1873; see also Messina 1969: 307-315). The Hamilton-based *Muto Soccorso* was modeled after its Sicilian counterpart. It served certain needs of the Hamilton-Racalmutese between 1918 and 1976. In fact, over the years, the society helped many families overcome financial hardship. Now that the community is much more firmly established in Hamilton, there is no longer a need for this type of mutual-aid society.

To my knowledge, the *Mutuo Soccorso* is the only mutual-aid society that specifically served the needs of the Racalmutese community in Hamilton. Membership in this society was limited to male Racalmutese. Some of the Racalmutese women, however, helped organize an Italo-Canadian women's society—the Marconi Mutual Benefit Society—in the mid-1930s. This society also collects contributions so that members can pay their respects to the sick and dying. This society has survived into the 1980s because it also functions as a social club.

*Fratellanza Racalmutese.* There are various social and recreational clubs in Hamilton that have a predominantly Racalmutese clientele. Of these associations, the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* is most active in promoting various contacts with Racalmuto. This voluntary association was established in 1933. Its membership consists of approximately 250 adult male Racalmutese.

With respect to everyday activities, members visit the club primarily to play cards, meet and talk with friends, and sometimes view television broadcasts of sporting events. During the summer months, *boche* (an Italian form of lawn bowling) becomes a popular activity on the club's outdoor facilities. Occasionally, a group of men will also organize and prepare a communal meal for those present. Formal club activities (see Migliore 1980) include:

- 1) *Cultural Events.* The association and its members have sponsored, and/or participated in, various cultural events such as Italian opera performances, traditional music and dance performances, and Italian art exhibits.
- 2) *Dances.* Two "dinner and dance" evenings are held each year in the club hall. As entertainment, a hired band performing popular Italian/Sicilian music is featured.
- 3) *Picnics.* The *Fratellanza Racalmutese* sponsors several family-style picnics each summer. These events feature various games for both adults and children.
- 4) *Boche Tournament.* The association is represented by its members in several boche tournaments during the summers. Italo-Canadian associations from different Southern Ontario communities compete in these tournaments.
- 5) *Christmas Party.* A Christmas reunion is held at the club each year for members and their children. During the festivities, a costumed Santa distributes gifts to each child.

More recently, as will be discussed below, the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* has played an active role in the process of establishing "twin-city" relations between Racalmuto and Hamilton.



*Business Establishments.* In many cases, the Racalmutese of Hamilton tend to frequent the various grocery stores, bakeries, barber shops, travel agencies, cafes, and other business establishments that are owned and operated by their fellow community members. They also tend to make use of the services of Italian-speaking doctors and lawyers.

In my view, the Racalmutese community in Hamilton displays a relatively high degree of institutional completeness. In addition to the numerous informal ties between individuals, the Racalmutese tend to associate themselves with: a particular Italian-language parish; various social and recreational associations; and, at least in the past, with a particular mutual aid society. The Racalmutese, at a more general level of identification, are also Italo-Canadians. As Italo-Canadians they can make use of the various services available to individuals of Italian background in southern Ontario, which include: Italian-language radio and television programs that are broadcasted by a number of stations; children's Italian-language classes that are offered by Italo-Canadian organizations; Italian-language newspapers and magazines; and a variety of other services. For the Racalmutese in Hamilton, then, a degree of institutional completeness exists at two separate levels of identification.

Although a relatively high degree of institutional completeness currently exists within the Racalmutese community, there are definite signs that it is on the decline. The demise of the *Muto Soccorso* is an obvious indicator of this decline process. The Racalmutese themselves are also concerned about the future of the various social and recreational clubs (Migliore 1980). Informants stress that very few second- and third- generation Sicilian-Canadians are presently enrolled as members of these associations. The everyday activities associated with these clubs serve basically to reconstruct various Sicilian pastimes. These activities do not attract many Canadian-born Racalmutese. According to informants, second- and third- generation Sicilian-Canadians "have their own interests, friends, and activities" (Migliore 1980: 47). The Racalmutese recognize that unless more Canadian-born individuals actively participate in the social and recreational clubs, these associations will eventually experience the same fate as that of the *Mutuo Soccorso*. At the moment, then, "institutional completeness" exists at a relatively high level because there are many Sicilian-born individuals who actively make use of the various formal structures and associations. In the future these associations must find ways to appeal to a greater cross-section of the Racalmutese community. To a certain extent, the role played by the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* (and other associations) in the "twinning" of Hamilton with Racalmuto can be viewed as an attempt to reach a larger segment of the ethnic group.

#### A Tale of Two Cities: The Role of Religious Symbols

The key religious event in Racalmuto, Sicily is the celebration of the feast of the *Madonna del Monte*. Traditionally the celebration took place during the month of May. In recent years, the celebration has taken place from Friday through Monday on the second weekend of each July, to provide the Racalmutese residing in other regions and nations with an opportunity to take part in the festivities. The actual preparations for the feast begin months in advance. By the time the festivities officially begin, the city is greatly transformed: the main

streets are lined with vendors' stalls; festival lights are strategically placed in certain sections of the city; arcade games and ride are set up in two separate locations; and, the main church, the *Chiesa de Maria SS. del Monte* is carefully decorated with floral arrangements.

The first day of the feast is devoted to the celebration of the events that brought the status of the *Madonna del Monte* to Racalmuto, in the 16th century. According to legend:

In 1503 A.D., a hunting party led by Eugenio Gioeni, a Sicilian noble, discovered the status of the *Madonna* (carrying the infant Jesus) in a North African cave. After hearing the Madonna speak to him, Gioeni vowed to take the image to his home of Castrovillino, Sicily. In order to reach Castrovillino, however, it was necessary to travel through Racalmuto. It was here that the second miracle occurred. The citizens of Racalmuto were deeply moved and awestruck by the beauty of the statue, and the holy figure it represented. Count Ercole del Carretto of Racalmuto made every effort to convince Gioeni to allow the statue to remain in Racalmuto. When this failed, the two sides began to engage in an armed struggle. It was the Madonna herself, however, that miraculously expressed her wish to remain in Racalmuto: the oxen transporting the cart carrying the Madonna's statue went down on bended knee, and the wheels of the cart itself sank into the ground. Everyone recognized, and accepted, what had happened as a miracle. A short time later a church was built on that spot to commemorate the event.<sup>2</sup>

The highlight of the Friday activities is the performance of a popular drama based on the work of Padre Bonaventura Caruselli, *Da Lucca* (1856). The statue of the Madonna, mounted on an ox-drawn cart, is paraded through the main streets of the city. When it arrives at a particular location, a number of young people, dressed in 16th century style costumes, perform the drama. The drama serves as a re-enactment of the miraculous events that brought the statue of the Madonna to Racalmuto.

The Saturday activities include a major procession that culminates with the arrival of a very colorfully decorated float—the *Cero dei Borgese*. A beautiful banner depicted the *Madonna del Monte* is proudly displayed at the top of the float. As the float arrives on the main street of the city, the young, unmarried male members of the *Borgese* society (a Racalmutese agricultural society) rush to the float and try to capture its main banner. The winner of this struggle receives a large sum of money, and a great deal of prestige. In fact, he becomes the most eligible bachelor in the city.

Sunday is devoted primarily to religious activities. In addition to the regular services conducted in churches throughout Racalmuto, special *messe* are celebrated in the *Chiesa de Maria SS. del Monte*. During these services, brightly decorated horses are raced up the steep steps leading to the church. The horses are then guided into the church where the priest blesses the sacks of grain they are carrying. This benediction is given to help promote a bountiful harvest. In the evening, a large procession accompanies a float transporting the statue of the Madonna throughout the main streets of Racalmuto. Once the statue is returned

to the church, the entire community takes part in an outdoor celebration of the *mass*. Monday evening, in contrast, is reserved for secular enjoyment. The festivities end with a live band performing popular music and song. The weekend is also marked by several separate, but complementary, firework displays.

The feast of the *Madonna del Monte* has also been celebrated in Southern Ontario. A modified, but nonetheless elaborate, version of the feast took place in Hamilton in 1932.<sup>3</sup> On two successive evenings, Saturday and Sunday, a section of Barton St. West near the heart of the Racalmutese community was closed to traffic. This was done in order to allow the following festivities to take place. First, the Racalmutese re-enacted the events surrounding the arrival of the statue of the Madonna to Racalmuto. Second, the festivities included a major procession. During the procession, the statue of the Madonna which the community had donated to *Our Lady of All Souls'* church was transported by a colourful float. Third, two bands, one made up of Hamilton-based Racalmutese and the other consisting primarily of Racalmutese residing in Rochester, New York, provided entertainment. And, fourth, firework displays added colour and excitement to the proceedings. This was the only celebration of the feast of the *Madonna del Monte* to take place in Hamilton. After a hiatus of about 40 years, however, Milton, Ontario served as the site for several celebrations of the feast. These celebrations were actively attended by the Hamilton-Racalmutese. In addition, some members of the community travel to Sicily each July to visit relatives and take part in festive activities.

In my view, the *Madonna del Monte* serves as an important religious symbol of both *cultural* and *community* identity for the Racalmutese in Hamilton. The Blessed Virgin Mary has a long history as a religious symbol in Latin Europe (Wolf 1969: 294-296). This is particularly true of Sicily, where the Madonna is officially recognized as the patron saint of the island (Correnti 1975: 71-75).<sup>4</sup> Various sources agree that Sicilians display a special attachment to the Virgin Mary (e.g., Birubbaum 1986; Correnti 1976; Giovannini 1981). I suggest that the attachment the Hamilton-based Racalmutese display towards the Madonna is one of the ways that they, consciously or unconsciously, celebrate the *Sicilian-ness* of their community. The fact that this attachment is directed specifically to the *Madonna del Monte*, the patron saint of Racalmuto, serves as the link to Racalmuto itself. In this sense, the special attachment and devotion the Hamilton-Racalmutese display towards the *Madonna del Monte* serves to identify them as Sicilians at one level and as Racalmutese at a more specific level. Since the *Madonna del Monte* serves as a major symbol of cultural and community identification, the feast of the Madonna played a significant role in the process of "twinning" Hamilton with Racalmuto.

#### **Mundialization: The Twinning of Hamilton and Racalmuto**

As part of its mundialization program, Hamilton has established "twin-city" relations with several communities throughout the world. These communities include: Fukiyama, Japan; Mangalore, India; and, Shawinigan, Quebec, Canada. Hamilton has also participated in a long-standing athletic exchange relationship with Flint, Michigan, U.S.A. More recently, in July 1986, the city officially mundialized with Racalmuto, Sicily, Italy. In this section, I will outline the various developments associated with the Hamilton-Racalmuto mundialization process.

While on vacation in Racalmuto in July 1979, Sig. Angelo Cino, the president of the Hamilton-based *Fratellanza Racalmutese*, and Dr. Salvatore Restivo of the Racalmuto-based *Pro Loco* (a society devoted to promoting local artistic and cultural achievements) began to discuss the possibility of establishing closer links between Racalmuto and Hamilton. The two individuals then communicated their views informally to the other members of their respective communities. It soon became apparent that both the Racalmutese in Sicily and those in Hamilton were in favor of developing a more formal rapport between the two communities. The *Fratellanza Racalmutese* and the *Pro Loco* played an active role in developing this rapport; the two associations helped organize and/or promote various activities.

On January 8, 1983, for example, the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* sponsored a fund-raising supper to assist a group from Racalmuto with their efforts to promote the beatification of Padre Elia Lauricella (1707-1780). Padre Elia was an 18th century Racalmutese priest and holy figure (see Morreale 1982). Many Racalmutese report having received miraculous assistance, in times of need, after praying to Padre Elia. Members of the association report that the event was a success, and that both monetary contributions and words of encouragement were given to the Sicilian group.

September 24, 1983 marked the 50th anniversary of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* in Hamilton. During the festivities celebrating this historic moment, members of the association unveiled a beautiful commemorative plaque, and read notes of congratulations, that had been received from the *Pro Loco* of Racalmuto. Several prominent local politicians attended this celebration; among them was Alderman Vince Agro, a Hamilton-Racalmutese. Alderman Agro, at the request of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* and other members of the Racalmutese community in Hamilton, began to look into the possibility of establishing official relations between the two cities. As part of this process, Alderman Agro and other interested individuals organized the Hamilton/Racalmuto Mundialization Committee.

In its efforts to formally link the two communities, the Hamilton/Racalmuto Mundialization Committee organized a special slide show presentation to display the works of the 17th century Racalmutese artist Pietro D'Asaro (1579-1647).<sup>5</sup> The presentation took place at the Hamilton Art Gallery, on October 2, 1985. The event was designed to draw attention to the long history of Racalmutese cultural and artistic achievements. At the Art Gallery display, Mayor Robert Morrow announced to an appreciative audience that the city of Hamilton was formally seeking to establish "twin-city" relations with Racalmuto. Alderman Agro represented the city of Hamilton in the official communications with Mayor Calogero Sardo and the Racalmuto city council. The basis for mundialization are clearly outlined in the following excerpt of the Racalmuto Community Council Deliberation of Oct. 12, 1985:

The considerable relations between the two communities—such as cultural and touristic exchanges, and the appreciation of the respective popular traditions—provide the basis for twinning. The relations, in turn, rest on the fact that there are more than 6,000 Racalmutese in Hamilton, who over the decades have become well integrated in the Canadian collective—so much so that a Racial-

mutese is Deputy Mayor and many others have reached notable heights in the political, economic, etc., arenas. Even so, they have maintained a solid bond with their land of origin. The strong sentiments between the two communities can be seen in the ever increasing projection in Hamilton of a series of cultural, religious, and social events that have been celebrated in Racalmuto (thinking of the celebration in Canada of the Feast of the Madonna del Monte, patron of Racalmuto; the display of the paintings of Pietro D'Asaro, Racalmutese artist of the 17th century; . . . etc.); events of great importance that have been agreeably received by the Canadian citizens . . . Remember, "twinning" represents to the Racalmutese in Hamilton the proof of the firm willingness of the Racalmutese in Racalmuto to maintain with them a constant relationship of affection, recognizing their right to feel they are an integral part of our community. (my translation)

The mundialization agreement between the two cities was completed in the summer of 1986. Mayor Morrow, and certain members of the Hamilton-Racalmutese community, travelled to Racalmuto for the official signing of the agreement and the exchange of gifts. This diplomatic visit coincided with the Feast of the *Madonna del Monte*. For the Racalmutese in Hamilton this was a major achievement. The twinning of the two communities represents the fact that the Racalmutese in Sicily and Hamilton continue to share a firm commitment to each other.

I would like to argue that the official "twinning" of the two communities at the time of the Feast of the *Madonna del Monte* was not a coincidence. For the Racalmutese of both Sicily and Hamilton the *Madonna del Monte*, and the festivities celebrating the initial arrival of her statue to the city, are key symbols by which they can identify themselves as *Racalmutese*. It is my belief that by finalizing the mundialization process during the festive activities the Racalmutese symbolically expressed the following messages: (1) it is Racalmuto, and not any other Sicilian/Italian community, that is "twinning" with Hamilton; (2) the "twinning" has deep importance to all Racalmutese; and, (3) we extend a special welcome to all Hamiltonians to share in what we hold most dear. In other words, the religious symbols serve to unite the two communities in a *sacred* relationship that extends beyond political, economic, and cultural consideration.

The timing of the mundialization agreement between Racalmuto and Hamilton takes on a greater significance when one considers the fact that Racalmuto also "twinned" with another city, during the 1986 celebration of the feast. Racalmuto also completed a "twinning" arrangement with Castronovo, Sicily. It was the nobles of Castronovo who discovered the statue of the *Madonna* in the early 16th century. Although the *Madonna* herself, according to legend, decided that her statue should remain in Racalmuto, many Racalmutese suggest that a degree of rivalry and animosity persisted between the two communities for centuries. Some of the older Racalmutese still tell stories about past attempts by the people of Castronovo to recover (steal) the statue of the *Madonna*. By becoming twin cities, the two communities may have symbolically put an end to the animosity. In the future, the people of Castronovo will be able to officially participate and share in the celebration of the feast. Since the "twinning" agree-

ment between Racalmuto and Hamilton took place at the same time, the Hamilton-Racalmutese were officially included in the historic resolution of a centuries-old problem. The resolution of the problem is of great significance to all Racalmutese.

### Conclusion

The Racalmutese have been able to overcome the various hardships they faced as immigrants in a new country. They have succeeded in providing their sons and daughters with what they perceive as a better life: a life that includes the achievement of various educational, professional, and personal goals. Today, the Hamilton-Racalmutese are contributing members of Canadian society in many fields of endeavor. At the same time, however, they have developed various techniques to help them preserve both their cultural identity as Sicilians, and a strong attachment to their native- or ancestral- community of Racalmuto, Sicily, Italy.

At a general level, the various techniques can be lumped together under the categories of "institutional completeness" and "ethnic identification." The Hamilton-Racalmutese have developed a relatively high degree of institutional completeness that is characterized by various social and recreational associations, an Italian-language parish, and other formal structures. In addition to this, they are in a position where they can take advantage of various services provided by numerous Italo-Canadian organizations. For the Hamilton-Racalmutese, then, institutional completeness occurs at two levels of analysis. Institutional completeness, however, is an insufficient explanation for the persistence of ethnic affiliation among Sicilian-Canadians. In fact, there are certain signs that the degree of institutional completeness, although still relatively high, is currently on the decline. This decline has not damaged people's conceptions of their ethnic and cultural identity. The Racalmutese are making use of various symbols, and in particular the religious symbol of the *Madonna del Monte*, in the process of identifying themselves as members of a particular ethnic group.

The Hamilton/Racalmuto mundialization process has served to effectively combine both structural and symbolic factors in helping people maintain a strong sense of who and what they are. The "twinning" of the two cities provides the Hamilton-Racalmutese with an official and formal link to their native- or ancestral- community. This is a diplomatic, structural arrangement. In my view, however, a matter of such major importance for the Racalmutese could only be completed within the context of a very significant annual occurrence—the Feast of the *Madonna del Monte*. In this context the structural agreement was charged with heightened emotion and transformed into a sacred relationship: a sacred relationship that has been witnessed and approved by the town's patron saint, the *Madonna del Monte*. For all intents and purposes, the two communities are now engaged in a form of "ritual kinship"; implicit in this relationship is the notion that the two communities will display a great deal of affection towards one another, and that they will engage in the type of reciprocity that benefits both communities.

This sacred relationship has been consummated further through cultural exchanges and celebrations. In September of 1986, for example, the *Gruppo Folkloristico* of Racalmuto, a musical group performing traditional Racal-



mutese/Sicilian songs and dances, performed at several functions for Hamiltonians of various backgrounds as part of Hamilton's annual *Festitalia* celebrations. Later the same year, Dr. Antonio Alessio of McMaster University, in conjunction with a number of different organizations and individuals (including the Hamilton/Racalmuto Mundialization Committee), organized and presented a conference in commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the death of Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936). Pirandello is a famous Sicilian writer from Agrigento, Sicily. Racalmuto is located in the province of Agrigento. The Racalmutese are very proud of Pirandello's literary achievements. More recently, in September of 1987, Mayor Sardo of Racalmuto made an official visit to Hamilton. This visit formally concluded the "twinning" agreement between the two communities. Mayor Sardo was accompanied by the *Gruppo Folkloristico* who again performed for general audiences in Hamilton and other nearby locations. During their stay in Hamilton, Mayor Sardo officially invited everyone to attend the special 1988 celebration of the *Feast of the Madonna del Monte*. Every fifty years Racalmuto celebrates a much more elaborate and longer lasting version of the feast; the elaborate celebration will take place in July of 1988.

While a degree of institutional completeness provides the Hamilton-Racalmutese with a structural basis for maintaining their cultural and ancestral identity; religious symbols such as the *Madonna del Monte* are very important in the actual expression of this identity. Thus I argue that the strong attachment and devotion expressed towards the *Madonna del Monte* serves to identify people as *Racalmutese*. The use of key religious symbols allows not only immigrants, but also second- and third- generation Sicilian-Canadians to identify themselves as part of the ethnic group. Although "institutional completeness" may continue to decline in the future, the Racalmutese of Hamilton have found and will continue to find ways to *symbolically* express their cultural identity and thereby maintain their ethnic identity. Now that the "twinning" arrangement between Hamilton and Racalmuto has been completed, I expect additional cultural exchanges and celebrations to take place.

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#### NOTES

1. Meanwhile, the population size of Racalmuto declined from approximately 16,000 in 1900 to about 10,000 in the 1980s (Savatteri 1984: 4).
2. This is my brief summary of the legend. For additional information concerning the tradition of the *Madonna del Monte* see Caruselli (1856), Martorana (1982: 96-106), Messina (1969: 90-95), and Messina et al. (1982). Similar accounts and legends can be found in other parts of Sicily (Correnti 1975), and variations on this theme can be found throughout the



- Mediterranean portion of Western Europe (see Christian 1973: 107). For a general discussion of the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary see Warner (1976).
3. In the mid-1930s members of the Racalmutese community in Hamilton also organized a group to perform a *Passion Play*—a play focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The group gave several performances of the passion play at both the Grand Opera House and the Savoy in Hamilton, and two performances in Buffalo, New York.
  4. In fact, Lucia Chiavola Birubbaum (1986: 7-9) argues that the special place of the Madonna in Sicily may reflect the preservation of a much older religious tradition of the Earth Mother dating back to prehistoric times.
  5. For a biographical account of Pietro D'Asaro's life, and a discussion of his work, see Demma (1985).

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