

calabria in australia: customs and traditions of italians from caulonia

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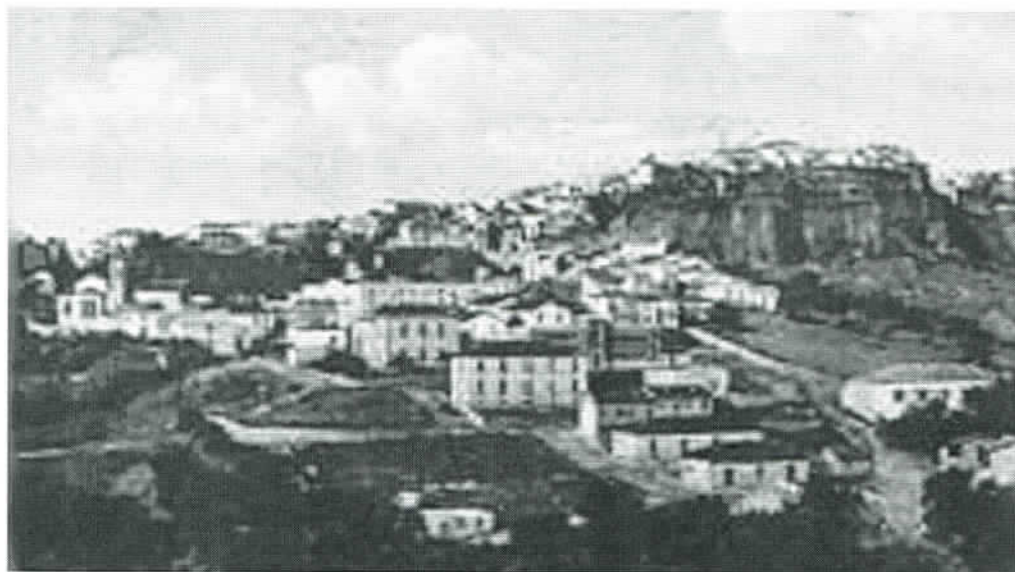
At the beginning of the twentieth century Calabria, like many other southern Italian regions, was one of the most depressed in Italy. In 1905 the Italian government tried to

stimulate its underdeveloped economy through agrarian reform (*legge speciale*) which, instead of achieving its aim of dividing large estates among agricultural labourers, ended up depriving them of their rights and their land.¹ The failure of government intervention and the lack of class struggle, along with malaria and destructive earthquakes in 1905 and 1908, hindered the economic development of the region and contributed to large-scale emigration. In the first fifteen years of the last century over 600,000 Calabrians migrated to North and South America,² and between the two wars over 250,000 settled abroad.³ After the introduction of a quota system in the USA in the 1920s Calabrians began to consider other destinations, including Australia.

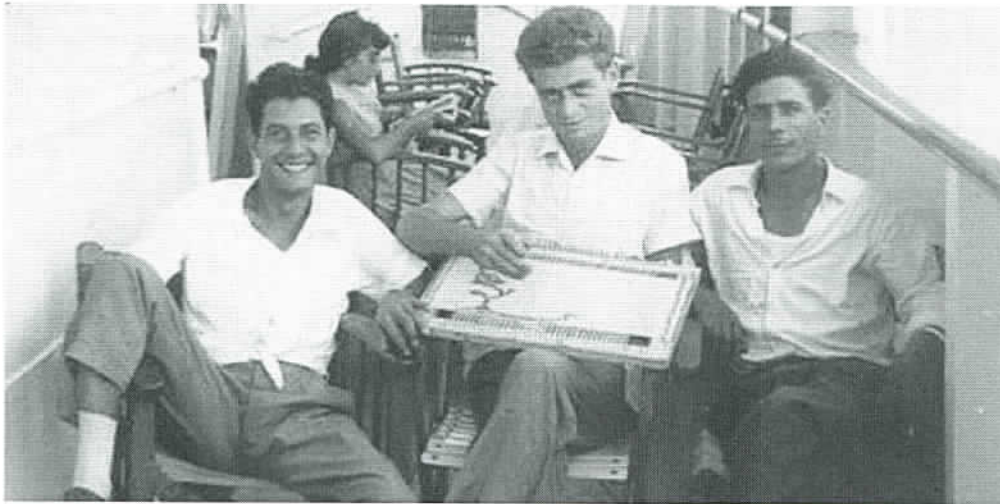
As late as the 1950s, in spite of massive intervention by the Italian State through the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (State Fund for the South), Calabria remained one of the most underdeveloped regions in Italy and, with its social and economic problems, became known as *l'area depressa* (the depressed area). In 1951, a quarter of the population was still illiterate, two-thirds of the labour force were employed in agriculture and a third of families (the highest in Italy) lived in poverty.⁴ Between 1950 and 1953, with a yearly average of 18,000 departures, Calabria was the Italian region with the highest level of migration to overseas destinations.⁵ The migration of Italians towards Canada and Australia almost doubled that of the United States: this was in part due to the restrictive legislation introduced in the US in the 1920s, and to the launch of mass immigration programs by the Canadian and Australian governments.



Migrants from Caulonia at the port of Messina, waiting to embark for Australia, c. 1960.



View of the Town of Caulonia, c. 1960.



Vincenzo Raschella, left, with other Calabrian migrants on board the ship *Roma* bound for Australia, c.1960.

The Calabrian town of Caulonia has given more of its residents to Australia than any other in Italy. Between 1927 and 1940, of the 2,493 Italians who arrived in South Australia, 512 were from the region of Calabria. Of these, 87 were from Caulonia.⁶ Chain migration ensured that the Calabrian settlement in the post-war period mirrored the pre-war percentages. Calabria remains the second-most represented Italian region in South Australia. Today, there are 1,364 migrants from Caulonia.⁷

The ancient village of Caulonia is situated 121 kilometres north-east of Reggio Calabria and 64 kilometres south of Catanzaro. Perched high on a hilltop, and encompassed by the remnants of a city wall, medieval gates and sheer cliffs, Caulonia during the course of its history has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. Its name appeared in eleventh century documents as *Castelvetere*, from the Latin *Castrum Vetus* (old fortress). In 1862, after the unification of Italy, it changed its name back to Caulonia to celebrate its Greek origin.

Agriculture has been for centuries the primary means of subsistence of the whole village, and continues to play a major role in its economy. The primary agricultural products are citrus fruits, cereals, olives and vegetables. The industrial sector is particularly weak because of the lack of investment, and the unemployment rate is higher than the national average.

During the interwar period Caulonia was a small farmer-owned town characterised by economic and social inequality. On the one hand there were the few wealthy landowners who had been in power for centuries, and on the other there was the majority of the population who lived in a state of subordination and in the most impoverished conditions. Small farmers and

labourers had nothing at all, not even the bare minimum to avoid starvation. Many were forced to turn to migration in search of a better life. The situation was worsened by the disastrous flooding of 1951, which not only destroyed the already shaky livelihoods of a large number of farming families, but also revealed the inability of the State to intervene in any substantial way. Emigration became once again the only hope for thousands of *cauloniesi* who were compelled to leave in search of a more dignified future.

There is not a family in Caulonia that does not have one or more relatives who have migrated either to northern Italy or to other countries such as Australia, the USA, Canada, Argentina, Venezuela or France. Due to migration, the town's population has steadily declined from a peak of 13,838 in 1921 to just 7,756 in 2001.

At the beginning of the twentieth century migration from Caulonia was mainly directed to North and South America, whereas in the post Second World War period the most popular destination was Australia, which absorbed 69 per cent of *cauloniese* migrants, followed by the USA (17 per cent) and Argentina (13 per cent). Among the Australian states, South Australia was by far the preferred destination followed by Western Australia and Victoria.

The *cauloniesi* in Adelaide has become a well-known and enterprising community that is interested in the maintenance of its traditions, and which has a solid attachment to its roots and homeland. In order to examine how the migration experience has impacted on some socio-cultural practices of the *cauloniesi* in Adelaide, such as family structure, engagement and wedding rituals, a number of interviews were conducted with first-generation migrants in South Australia and in Caulonia.

Concern for family well-being, which drove many *cauloniesi* to migrate, shows how important the family has been and still is in their lives. The *cauloniese* family in Australia is a 'nuclear family' consisting of father, mother and dependent children, but characterised by strong ties and contacts with relatives. According to most of the participants in the study, this was also the structure that characterised the *cauloniese* family in Italy, before migration. In Italy in the past, apart from meeting for family milestones, such as birthdays, name days, engagements, weddings, Christmas and Easter, the family would come together when physical help was needed to slaughter the pig, harvest the wheat or pick the olives. Today the *cauloniese* family in Adelaide still maintains this same high degree of social cohesion through frequent family gatherings. Christmas, Easter and birthdays are usually spent together, and regular weekly or at least annual gatherings are also organised. Although most of the *cauloniesi* who live in Caulonia still meet at least once a year with their relatives, it is apparent that today in Australia the extended family is more close-knit than in Italy because of the busy Italian lifestyle that prevents family members from visiting one another.

Family honour, respect and parental authority were, and still are, central to the value system of first-generation *cauloniesi* in Australia, and they have influenced the code of conduct of family members in relation to important life-cycle events such as engagements and weddings. In the past, 'honour' for a man signified the ability to provide economically for his family, whereas for the woman it meant being a virgin before marriage and being a good and faithful wife.⁸ Double standards were therefore applied to sons and daughters in relation to freedom. Life for most girls was restricted by

codes of family honour and female chastity, the betrayal of which would have brought shame and dishonour to the whole family. Consequently, daughters had to be protected: they were never allowed, before marrying, to go out unchaperoned and were never left alone with a male other than a close relative.⁹

Other examples of parental authority reported for this study are the decisions made in relation to matters such as migration for the young sons, and the choice of marriage partners for the young daughters. One interviewee remembered:

My mother decided for me and told my uncle, who had already settled in Australia, to sponsor me because economically life was very depressed in Caulonia. I wanted to join the Navy, but my mother decided for me. Until I left, I thought that it was a joke.

In the past, it was not at all uncommon for parents to arrange marriages for their daughters. Four of the women interviewed had to accept their parents' decision to marry them to much older men. One girl in particular, who was only fourteen at the time, became engaged to a man eighteen years her senior:

I knew that I had to get married when I was not even fourteen because parents used to decide. My mother kept it hidden, but I noticed it ... and when I asked my mother how old my future husband was, she replied that it was none of my business. But the grown-ups thought that it was a good thing, so I went along with it.

The unfair treatment women were subjected to made them aware of the contradictions of their own patriarchal upbringing and of its inherent double standards. Thus, the women have sometimes become mediators between the authoritarian behaviour of their

Engagement party at the Nesci family home in Strano, hamlet of Caulonia, 1961.



husbands and their daughters' desire to gain more freedom.¹⁰ As one *cauloniese* woman recalls:

I treated my children [two daughters and a son] equally, unlike my husband who didn't allow my daughters to go out before getting married.

Today, although the idea of family honour, double standards in parental control and authoritarian fathers might appear out of date to the younger *cauloniese* generation in Italy, they remain fundamental values for many of the first-generation *cauloniesi* in Adelaide. Most of the married male interviewees admitted having applied double standards to the upbringing of their sons and daughters, especially in relation to the eldest daughter, whereas most of the informants interviewed in Caulonia said that young people are now much freer than they used to be.

The ritual of the engagement has been much modified by Australian practices over the years. While in the pre-migration past it was celebrated in a similar fashion by the Australian and Italian *cauloniesi* interviewed, today the event is more highly regarded by the *cauloniesi* living in Australia than by their counterparts in Italy. In the past, the ritual leading to the engagement was quite formal and included all the members of the two families. If a man wanted to become engaged to a woman, he could not ask her directly because he was not allowed to speak to her. He had to talk about his intentions to his parents who would then ask the woman's parents, who would occasionally ask their daughter's opinion. If the engagement was arranged, a *festicciola in famiglia* (small family party) would then take place, attended by close members of both families. Most of the interviewees in Adelaide and in Caulonia remember that during the period of the engagement the two fiancés could not talk to each other, much less sit next to each other.

Today in Australia, engagements are usually larger and more formal than the ones celebrated in Italy. Furthermore, they involve the participation of several hundred people, family members and friends, the hiring of a hall for the reception, the handing over of the engagement ring and the exchange of expensive gifts.

In Caulonia the engagement ritual is very rarely celebrated, and now consists of a meal shared at home by members of the immediate family. It does not include the exchange of gifts, but only the presentation of the engagement ring.



Mr and Mrs Nesci celebrate their wedding in 1935. Mrs Nesci was one of the first brides in Caulonia to wear a white dress because she was the daughter of l'americano, a *cauloniese* migrant who had made some money in the United States.

The difference in size and importance of the engagement in Australia perhaps reflects the need for migrants to display symbolically their newly-acquired prestige and wealth, which compensate for the poverty from which they escaped.¹¹ As one informant observed:

Here the engagement is celebrated in the overly luxurious hall. It's a show off. Everybody tries to outdo the other.

Wedding celebrations have undergone significant changes over time. One of the trends that has changed the most is the age of the bride and groom. It was once common for young women of sixteen or seventeen to marry older men between the ages of twenty and forty. Most of the *cauloniesi* interviewed explained that in the past a woman was considered old when she was twenty. The tendency of the *cauloniese* families in the past to marry off their daughters at a very young age was motivated by economic and moral concerns. In Caulonia, as in Sicily, it was customary 'for families to marry all the daughters before the sons to avoid economic hardship. If the sons married first, they would have deprived the family of their earnings and left the parents with daughters who were not major wage earners'.¹² The other reason was linked to the concept of honour previously described: the earlier the daughter married the less the parents had to worry about preserving her purity.

Wedding of
Francesco Alvaro,
Caulonia, 1946.



The informants unanimously reported that villagers tended to marry other *paesani*, mainly because nobody travelled in those days and they did not have a chance to meet people from other places. The marriage ritual was generally divided into two parts: a civil ceremony, celebrated by the mayor at the town hall, followed by a religious ceremony celebrated in the local church. The wedding ceremony used to include, and still does, *il compare d'anello* (best man) who hands over the rings, and two or four witnesses chosen by the bride and the groom, who wear an outfit of their own choice.

The bride did not necessarily wear a white dress, but the best dress she had. One of the informants reported that, since her mother did not have enough money to buy her a new dress, she was obliged to get married at four o'clock in the morning in order to avoid the gossip and criticism of *paesani*. Another participant recalled that when she married in 1935 she was one of the first brides in Caulonia to wear a white dress because she was the daughter of *l'americano*, a migrant who had made some money in the USA and had the financial means to buy his daughter a nice white wedding dress. It was common practice for the *paesani* who had migrated to the USA to send to Italy wedding dresses that were subsequently altered for the local brides. Between the 1930s and the 1960s wedding receptions in Caulonia were organised either at the home of the bride's parents or at the local parish hall. Refreshments consisted of *paste alla crema* (cream pastries) and *rosolio*, a homemade liqueur made with alcohol and coloured essence. The refreshments were followed by *il ballo* (dancing). The attendance at the reception held at the parish was always larger than the

one that took place at home, but rarely exceeded a hundred guests. Gifts for the newlyweds consisted of small household items or foodstuffs such as salami, olives and cheeses.

All the informants interviewed in Adelaide indicated that over the years wedding ceremonies in Australia have been modified by local practices. They described the marriage in Italy prior to migration as simpler, less expensive, and characterised by lower levels of guest participation.

Italian weddings in Australia usually involve a religious celebration and are characterised by expensive bridal gowns, the hiring of *la sala* (the wedding venue) and expensive gifts. Today, Italo-Australian weddings have incorporated the British tradition of having bridesmaids and groomsmen who have to wear elaborate outfits usually chosen by the bride and groom. Receptions are attended by between 150 and 450 guests, including family members and other *paesani*. Many informants described marriages in Australia as *di lusso* (lavish) and as rituals that have become an occasion — as previously observed in the case of engagement practices — to show off the wealth and the respect acquired in Australia. This attitude is not only a one-sided concern on the part of the marriage makers, but also a social obligation felt by the participants themselves, who are generally expected to give a gift of a certain value. The importance of the opinions of other *paesani* as regards wedding receptions and the financial value of gifts shows that the *cauloniese* community in South Australia is very concerned with the question of public image: the need to *fare bella figura* and the concern with what people might say about one another.¹³



The Fanto family celebrates a wedding in Adelaide, c.1963.

The adherence to Italian family values and traditions has influenced parental attitudes towards de facto relationships and inter-ethnic marriages of their children. The majority of the *cauloniesi* interviewees living in Adelaide admitted that they would have been very disappointed had their children left home before marriage and they regarded it as a blessing when they did not.

There is a low rate of intermarriage between the Adelaide *cauloniesi* and Anglo-Australians or people of other ethnic backgrounds. In the small number of cases where children have married non-Italians, parents usually claim that:

In the beginning we were not happy. We would have preferred some Italians for the language and the traditions, but now we are happy because they are good people.

In the last three decades, Italian society has undergone significant cultural changes. While the pace has been slower in the South, industrial development has brought quality of life and acceptance of more open and modern models of behaviour and attitudes.¹⁴

One of the most profound changes in the *cauloniese* attitudes regarding wedding customs is the acceptance of the *convivenza* (de facto relationship). All the people interviewed in Italy admitted that living together prior to marriage is becoming increasingly more accepted even by the older generation.

In addition, in Caulonia people tend to marry later than the previous generation. Men and women are usually at least thirty when they marry. Many choose to complete university and then find employment before marrying. There is also a tendency to marry people from other towns or regions because young *cauloniesi* today travel for pleasure, study or work.

Today in Caulonia the marriage ritual still involves a civil and a religious celebration followed by a reception, usually held at a restaurant with the number of guests varying from 60 to 300. There is a common tendency 'to make up for the cost of the lunch' by giving a gift, usually money, to the same value as or higher than, the price of the restaurant meal. Most interviewees missed the intimate and familial tone that used to characterise the weddings of the past.

The *cauloniese* people interviewed in Adelaide displayed immense pride and attachment to their origins, to the family values, rituals and traditions that they brought with them at the time of migration. Some of these pre-migration customs, like engagements and weddings, have been, over the years, adapted to local Australian practices. Others, like the centrality of the family and the emphasis on gender differences have to a great extent retained their original traits.

Among the *cauloniesi* who have never migrated but have visited Australia, there is a general impression that the *cauloniese* family in Australia is more homogeneous and cohesive than the one in Caulonia. It seems that the maintenance of old traditions and the common migration experience 'have reinforced and strengthened the role of the family'.¹⁵ As two Italians in Caulonia explained:

Young people in Australia have grown up with the values of the 1950s. Young people over there [in Australia] are more attached to traditions, to friends; here they are more superficial.

Over there people are more united because they are in a foreign land; there is more respect, whereas here everybody leads their own life, everybody is more independent, there is more envy and people criticise each other more.

NOTES

- 1 P. Cinanni, *Emigrazione e imperialismo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1968, p.66.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.61.
- 3 G. Rosoli (ed.), *Un secolo di emigrazione Italiana 1876-1976*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Roma, 1978, p.363.
- 4 The data referring to Calabria in 1951 is from the Parliamentary Inquiry in C. Arena, 'La disoccupazione in Italia,' Rome, 1953, cited in R. Cavallaro, *Storie senza storia*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Roma, 1981.
- 5 G. De Bartolo, 'Aspetti dell'emigrazione italiana e calabrese negli Stati Uniti nel secondo dopoguerra', *Affari Sociali Internazionali*, XVIII, No. 3, 1990, p.97.
- 6 D. O'Connor, *No need to be afraid: Italian settlers in South Australia between 1839 and the Second World War*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town SA, 1996, p.118.
- 7 The data relating to migration from the Calabria region and from the province of Reggio Calabria between 1948 and 1971 is from the O'Connor database (36,357 names) derived from Alien Registration cards D4881/1, D4881/2, D4881/3, National Archives of Australia (SA), provided in *Memories and identities*, edited by D. O'Connor, Australian Humanities Press, Adelaide, 2004, pp.60-62.
- 8 L. Bertelli, 'Italian families' in Des Storer, *Ethnic family values in Australia*, Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 1985, p.53.
- 9 R. Huber, 'What will the neighbours say?' in M. E. Poole, P. R. de Lacey and B. S. Randhawa, *Australia in transition: culture and life possibilities*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1985, p.248.
- 10 E. Vasta, 'Gender, class and ethnic relations: the domestic and work experiences of Italian migrant women in Australia', in G. Bottomley, M. De Le Pervanche and J. Martin, *Intersexions*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p.172.
- 11 E. Vasta, G. Rando, S. Castles and C. Alcorso, 'The Italo-Australian community on the Pacific rim', in *Australia's Italians: culture and community in a changing society*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p.218.
- 12 C. Cronin, *The sting of change: Sicilians in Sicily and Australia*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, p.155.
- 13 L. Bertelli, 'Italian families', cit. See also: L. Baldassar, *Visits home: migration experiences between Italy and Australia*, Melbourne University Press, 2001; L. Baldassar, 'Marias and marriages: ethnicity, gender and sexuality among Italo-Australian youth in Perth', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, No. 1, March 1999, pp.1-22; R. Huber, 'What will the neighbours say?' in M. E. Poole, P. R. de Lacey and B. S. Randhawa *Australia in transition: culture and life possibilities*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1985.
- 14 L. Bertelli, 'Italian families', cit., p.36.
- 15 T. Gucciardo and L. Bertelli, *The best of both worlds: a study of second-generation Italo-Australians*, CIRC Papers, Fitzroy, Vic., 1987, p.13.