

De-orientalising Ritual Blood Calabria's Vattienti, a Case Study

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Abstract This article uses affect theory to redefine the flagellation rituals performed by the vattienti and to relate them to the *Šī'a* celebrations of *Āšūrā* in Lebanon. The term 'vattienti' designates the flagellants of a small village situated in Calabria (Southern Italy), who perform their rituals during the last days of the Holy Week, while *Āšūrā* indicates the mournful ceremonies dedicated to the martyr Ḥusayn. The paper argues that the two rites create specific affective atmospheres, and that the comparative analysis of these atmospheres – especially in relation to the agency of the Italian and Lebanese performants – allows us to overcome representations of these rituals that are centred on primordial religious fanaticism. Agency, specifically, is considered here as the human capacity to act and to resist social structures. The methodologies used in this research are qualitative and, especially, ethnographic fieldworks, participant observations and in-depth interviews.

Summary 1 Twisted Representations. – 2. Between Lebanon and Calabria: Geographies of Blood. – 2.1 Methodological Clarification. – 2.2 Nocera Terinese's Vattienti. – 2.3 Beirut's *Āšūrā*: The Ḥandaq al-Ġamīq Flagellants. – 3 Affective Atmospheres and Emotions. – 4 When Text Becomes Flesh and Flesh Becomes Text: The Flagellants' Agency. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords Agency. Affective Atmosphere. 'Āšūrā'. Vattienti.

Per fare le cose bene bisogna buttare il sangue.
(Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente,
13 April 2017)

For the skin is faster than the word.
(Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 2002)

1 Twisted Representations

In 1960, director Gualtiero Jacopetti, together with Franco Prospero, took some cinematographic shots in Nocera Terinese (a small village in Catanzaro's district) having as their main theme a particular flagellation ritual that takes place during the last days of Holy Week. A few minutes of these

shots were used to make a video, easy to find online,¹ which, if watched outside of the entire context of the documentary, would appear simply intended to make known one of the many rituals linked to Easter in Calabria, or more generally in Southern Italy. However, as reported by Ferlaino:

the movie altogether presents itself as an anthology of unusual episodes of primeval life and eccentric behaviours, gathered in the first half of the sixties, with an adventurous joyride in various countries all over the world. The documentary *Mondo Cane*, warping reality for the sake of entertainment, seeks to falsify the real meanings of the reported episodes and with unforgiving and amoral remarks tends to give them the cold shoulder and make fun of them. (1990, 134; Author's translation)

The documentary was shown in Italian movie theatres in 1962 and produced great controversy. In particular, it was damaging to the image of the *vattienti* (a term that identifies Nocera's flagellants), and by extension, that of Nocera's inhabitants, Calabrians, and Southern Italians in general, who took offence and were outraged by such a mocking representation (De Vincenzo 1987, 322; Lombardi Satriani 1979, 88-9).

During last year's Holy Week (2017), I went to the same, small Calabrian village to conduct ethnographic research focussed on the *vattienti*'s rituals. Twenty-five years later, the crawling resentment left by the twisted representations depicted by Jacopetti and his team was still clearly discernible among the townsfolk. The outsider's stereotyping eye emphasised the alleged fanaticism of the rituals' participants, presenting them as aggressive savages. Specifically, it is the fact of Jacopetti's having included the parts where the Calabrian flagellants perform the ritual within a sequence of scenes aiming to show an ancient alien world, made up of inhuman and gruesome rituals, that reveals this intention. In this context, one *vattiente*'s words become relevant:

they want to take away the animals from circuses; and we, maybe, following somebody's idea, should become the village's animals? (Author's unpublished interview with a senior *vattiente*, 11 April 2017)

With this article, I would like to pay tribute to the inhabitants of Nocera Terinese, and to the *vattienti*, who, with great human warmth and unparalleled hospitality, welcomed me and introduced me to their Holy Week rituals. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and Federico Calabrese Martuscelli, Estella Carpi, Sara Fregonese, Marco Lauri, Stefano Loi, Roberta Mungianu, Elena Pupulin, and my supervisor, Professor Marco Salati, for having read previous drafts of the manuscript.

¹ The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCeXiayJvFw> (2018-05-23).

Nonetheless, Jacopetti was not the first nor the last to stigmatise Southern Italy. Ferlaino (2007, 18) reports the expressions 'Italian Indies' and 'Indies of Down Here' as being used by Jesuit fathers to denounce the backwardness and the condition of clerical negligence that they considered to be common traits of Southern Italy's districts and countryside; however, this was actually a matter of a variety of specific rituals being maintained and preserved rather than having been swept away by the reforming fury of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Both Jacopetti and the throng of journalists, photographers, anthropologists, supposed scholars, random sightseers, and tourists who invade Nocera every year have created a twisted representation² of the *vattienti* due to finding themselves in a condition of "positional superiority" (Said 2003, 7).

Since the first hours of my visit to Nocera, I realised that whoever accepted the invitation to talk with me, and agreed to be interviewed or to better explain the ritual, wanted first and foremost to understand the way in which I intended to portray the *vattienti*, and from which point of view I wanted to depict the phenomenon of voluntary effusion of blood.

During the interviews and informal conversations conducted throughout the ten days of my stay in the Calabrian township (from 7 to 16 April 2017), it was furthermore emphasised by the interviewees how impossible it was for foreigners to deeply and truly understand the ceremony, and that these foreigners should have at least stayed in the township to witness it for a long enough period rather than simply watching a television report, looking at some photos or videos, or visiting Nocera for one day only. Moreover, they also stressed the exasperating nature of the photographers' attitudes and their obtrusiveness, which had grown stronger over the years, as inferred from the following passages extracted from various interviews:

2 Many authors have contributed, through their words, to transmitting an adulterated version of the *vattienti*, stressing the brutality, the gore, the inappropriate and ambiguous attitude and supposed drunkenness. Reported here are some examples: "Dopo di essersi resi brilli, battono fortemente con un pezzo di legno le parti laterali e posteriori delle cosce" (After getting themselves inebriated, they hit strongly with a chunk of wood the side and back parts of their thighs) (Borrello 1889, 29); "Orrida costumanza" (Horrendous tradition) (Pontieri 1921, 228), "Certamente, mi si farà osservare, è da barbari o da gente insensibile e retrograda un tale eccessivo zelo di mortificazione e di penitenza, in pieno secolo ventesimo" (Certainly, you will let me observe this, it is barbaric or it comes from heartless and hidebound people, such excessive zealotry in mortification and penitence in the late twentieth century) (230), "Poi, quando l'orrido e degenerato atto di penitenza è compiuto e l'effetto del buon vino scemato, i *battenti* rientrano a casa" (Afterwards, when the horrid and degenerate act of contrition is concluded and the effects of the tasty wine gone, the *battenti* go back home) (231); "A Nocera Tirinese (Nicastro) la devozione va sino al fanatismo, e i penitenti fanno le stazioni della Via Crucis battendosi con palle fatte con vetri uniti con pece, fino a lacerarsi a sangue, medicando poi le ferite con un'erba speciale" (In Nocera Tirinese (Nicastro) devotion morphs into fanaticism, and the confessants follow the Stations of the Cross hitting themselves with globes made out of glass and pitch until they bleed, then healing their wounds with a special herb) (Lumini cit. in Spinelli 2009, 15).

If the mouth dries, we wash it out with wine, but we do not drink it. And they say we get drunk: sometimes you even avoid doing that because then those vermin are going to record all of it. (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 11 April 2017)

Getting criticised is not an issue, it is fine, however they want to interpret it; the problem is reporting inaccuracies, or things that do not exist. The unnecessary nit-pick. They reported that vinegar was used, instead of wine; many times, we had very pushy photographers, they do not believe it is actually blood, and with those cameras they interfere, truly obtrusive [...] they said that maybe it is not actually cork but it is a sponge and we squeeze it. (Author's unpublished interview with a senior vattiente, 11 April 2017)

One year I collided with a photographer, the camera got closer and closer. Just do it without disturbing what I am doing. (Author's unpublished interview with a former vattiente, 14 April 2017)

Before proceeding with the analysis, and to ease the reader's comprehension of the geographic, and ethnographic route that the author intends to follow, the next section will be dedicated to the explanation of the vattienti ritual, which will then be linked with the 'Āšūrā' celebrations in Lebanon.

2 Between Lebanon and Calabria: Geographies of Blood

2.1 Methodological Clarification

The choice to correlate two blood rituals that belong to diverse geographic areas, form part of different religious universes, and are carried out according to their own specific procedures may seem audacious. However, what has encouraged me to persevere with such a line of enquiry has been the extraordinary similarity between the answers that the flagellants in both Nocera Terinese and Beirut gave to the same questions (see last paragraphs).

The aim of this article, however, is not to emphasise the similarities and differences between Nocera's vattienti and the flagellants from one of the central quarters of Beirut; accordingly, it will not address these in depth, and will not provide a full comparative picture regarding (e.g.) the rituals' characteristics and associated preparation, the applied hygienic norms, the procedures for cleaning roads, the tools used for the birching, the traditional meals served during both celebrations, the existing theatrical and carnivalesque aspects, the gender implications, and the role of the female counterparts in the rituals (all aspects that deserve their own piece of work).

Instead, the purpose of this article is very enclosed and specific: namely, to propose an ethnographic approach that focusses on the perception of the affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009) that are being generated, and on their influence upon the vattienti's body and sensations. Thus, it is the humanity of the vattienti that emerges. Their own emotive sphere allows us to shift away from the savage and brutal representations of them that has been so frequently propagated.

Specifically, this research proposes to unveil and highlight the agency of Nocera's vattienti/Beirut's flagellants, emphasising that they are themselves immersed in the same atmosphere that they contributed to creating and that emerges from their gestures, their texts, and their blood. Thus, the focus of this article concerns, on one side, the affective atmosphere, the bodies, and their physical reactions, as well as the manifested emotions and the affects³ and their inexplicableness; on the other, the concept of atmosphere will be bonded to that of agency (Ahearn 2002). Thus, it will propose a reading of the voluntary effusion of blood like a text, like a process of production of symbols and intertwined meanings, and as agency for the Nocera and Beirut flagellants, who resist their respective religious authorities' prohibitions and claim an agentic and industrious role in the society of which they are a part.

The following two subsections will provide a general conspectus of the two rituals; as the author wishes to reaffirm, the below lays no claim to exhaustiveness, but instead aims to simply supply a brief historic and cultural frame of reference from an ethnographic perspective.

2.2 Nocera Terinese's Vattienti

Although Nocera Terinese is not the only township in Italy, or in the South, in which there is some flagellant presence, it is the only one to be examined in this article. The reason behind this choice comes from the fact that their ritual is steadily expanding, and every passing year sees an increasing number of vattienti, contrary to other Calabrian townships such as Verbicaro (Cosenza) where the flagellants number less than a dozen and where the ritual disappeared entirely for a period of time, and Terranova

³ These two terms are not used according to the meaning given to them by common language, but rather following Massumi's analysis (2002, 27-39). Massumi considers affects as 'intensities', like some synesthetic not-fully-formed tensions towards the action, independent and autonomous from the bodies that make them experience, impersonal and transpersonal at the same time; emotions and feelings, moreover, are linked to one's biographic dimension, which manages to recognise them and define them through language, such that they are subjective, personal, and social. In short, they are recognised intensities to which names have been given. On the difference between feeling, emotion, and affect, see: Shouse 2005; in Deleuze and Guattari (2017), affects are described as 'intensities' (361-73).

da Sibari (Cosenza), where the ritual seems to have gone extinct in the 1970s (De Vincenzo 1985, 189, 190, 194-6; Ferlaino 1990, 235-41). In Nocera, however, the vattienti numbered almost one hundred in recent years (2016 and 2017),⁴ while this year (2018) their numbers supposedly reached one hundred and five.

It should be noted that the Easter processions, spread among all southern regions of Italy, which involve chest-hitting (with the hand or a sharp iron dampener) or shoulder-hitting with chains, do not result in huge blood loss to the extent that the streets are soaked by it like the flagellant's body; thus, they are not taken into consideration in this research. Moreover, the Seven Years Rituals of Guardia Sanframondi (Benevento) take place outside of the Holy Week period and are celebrated every seven years (in August), and thus also do not form part of this research.

The first written testaments about the presence of the ritual in the Calabrian township, which date back to the end of the nineteenth century (Ferlaino 1990, 60-4), describe the vattienti as fanatics in the grip of sincere devotion and voluntary penitence who, even at the time, maintained the ritual without regard for the prohibitions imposed by the civil and ecclesiastic authorities. Borrello presents them as:

Common people, in simple shirts and underpants, who hit energetically with a chunk of wood the side and back parts of their thighs, and, when they see them well redden, cause the blood to spill out of them using the 'cardo', a piece of cork spread with wax and bristling with glass shards. Then they crown themselves with thorns, cover their face with a black silk bandage and start running wildly through the streets. (1889, 29; Author's translation)

Modern-day vattienti diverge from this description, but still resemble it at a distance: today (but not in the past) they use black clothing, have their faces uncovered, and wear a black bandanna on the head, covered by a huge crown, made from an asparagus-like plant (the *sparacogna*, in their dialect).

The tools used are *la rosa* (rose), a cylindrical chunk of cork finely carved and polished, and *il cardo* (cardoon), to which are added thirteen shards of glass secured with a casting of beeswax (Faeta 2007, 176-7).

⁴ In 2016, there were counted ninety-six vattienti, while in 2017 this figure was slightly less at ninety-two. The source is an elder vattiente who, every year, armed with notebook and pen, counts the vattienti and writes this number down with great precision. During the evening of 13 April 2017, he reported to the author: "Se il tempo è buono si rischia di superare i cento" (If the weather is good, we could even surpass the hundred) (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente).



Figure 1. Vattiente. Nocera Terinese, 2017.
© Author

Figure 2. Cardi and rose. Nocera Terinese,
2017. © Author

The first is used in the preliminary phase of the ritual to hit “the meaty parts of the thighs and legs” (telephone conversation with an adult vattiente, 25 November 2016) and, in this way, causes the blood to flow. Afterwards follows the use of the cardoon, which, when used to hit the lower limbs perpendicularly with precise and estimated gestures (Faeta 1990, 217), causes the blood to spill.

This very private and discreet phase takes place inside a *catuoja* (storehouse), generally only in front of close friends and family.

In the past, cardoons were built by the vattienti themselves and by carpenters. Today, there are specific figures who, with great care, begin to prepare them around a month or so before Easter.⁵ The process begins with the carving of the cork (harvested during the previous autumn), the cutting of the glass, the obtaining of the beeswax, the actual construction, and the final sanitisation. During a visit to a builder’s storehouse, it was explained to me:

5 In 2017 the starting date has been 8 March (Easter 16 April), while in 2018 was Ashen Wednesday, 14 March (Easter, 1 April); the notices about the dates by the cardoon builder happened through WhatsApp (informal conversation).



Figure 3. Rosemary. Nocera Terinese, 2017. © Author



Figure 4. Vattiente and ecciomo. Nocera Terinese, 2017. © Author

In earlier times one used to go to the carpenters and pay for their work, but they made them badly, with bottle shards. These are 2 mm sheets for frames, the ones that you can find by the glass-maker. After some time, a vattiente decided to upgrade the cardoons. It is not a passion, we are always together, what one does, does the other, there was friendship, time after time [...] he taught me something, little by little. (Author's unpublished interview with a cardoon builder, 10 April 2017)

Borrello furthermore informs us that the vattiente's figure, at least since the end of the nineteenth century, was flanked by that of the *Ecce Homo* (*ecciomo* in dialect) – generally a child or an adolescent, but who can also be an adult male – wearing a red cloth (one of the skirts that make up the traditional female dress) fastened on the chest or on the waist, with a cross covered with red ribbons on the shoulders, and tied to the vattiente with a small rope. He also wears a crown of thorns. He represents Christ, humiliated and laughed at in front of Pontius Pilate.

To these two figures in recent decades has been added that of the wine bearer (Ferlaino 1990, 163) who follows the other two and often pours the wine upon the vattiente's wounds to ensure that they are constantly washed and to avoid the blood clotting and creating dark lumps, as the blood needs to spill freely.

Once the devotional tour (each with its own schedule) is finished, each vattiente, together with his ecciomo, comes back to the storehouse, where, together, they dress and prepare themselves.

There they rest, possibly eat something, and apply to their wounds a rosemary decoction (made by putting the herb in boiling water since the early morning and leaving it to cool by itself), which in a very short time stops the blood from spilling and soothes the skin.

The ritual's origin is strongly debated between those who consider them heirs to the crowds of Catholic flagellants, which were born in Italy during the Middle Ages, and those who believe them to be descendants of ancient pre-Christian cults.⁶ The second theory was sustained first by Basile, according to whom:

the ceremony is more ancient, and refers to another ritual, the ritual of earth's fertility, with the blood offering by the minister or by the devotee. From this point of view, it refers to the ancient Mediterranean rituals for Adonis' death or Attis' death, celebrated at the end of March, when spring returns. (Basile 1959; Author's translation)

The vattienti appear in two instances of Holy Week, namely Friday evening and Saturday, throughout the whole day (until 1956, the two dedicated days were Thursday and Friday), and execute the ritual flanking of the processions for the Virgin Mary's statue (referred to as 'The Grieved', and represented by a splendid wooden *Pietà* inspired by Michelangelo's masterpiece, to which Nocera's inhabitants are extremely devoted).

The Catholic Church has always expressed negative judgements and imposed heavy prohibitions on this ritual, especially during the years 1958-1960, during which the ecclesiastic authorities went so far as to resort to deploying public security agents and the Carabinieri (Italian police force) to stop the vattienti (Ferlaino 1990, 122-6). Today, a climate of mutual acceptance persists, although this does not presume a relationship of normalisation, as reported to me by a vattiente:

Then he came outside [talking about the bishop] and we talked, me, him, and a few others, during the exposition, an occasion. He started talking, I answered: "Excellency, the church is still alive and kicking, it never falls down huh? You all gave us a hard time for years". Answer: "Times change". It is too easy after many centuries to make History change the times. They forget. (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 8 April 2017)

6 For a more thorough and complete dissertation on this issue, see Ferlaino 1990, 194-225; on the pre-Christian rituals referred to above, see Frazer 2016, 388-422.

In an informal and unplanned meeting with the village's parish priest,⁷ which took place in the barber's shop at Nocera's main square during Holy Week, I had the occasion to ask what he thought about the ritual of blood. He answered me in a manner at once unreadable and blunt: "I do not think, I pray".⁸ In a second meeting, equally fleeting and unplanned, at the same barbershop, he recounted to me an anecdote of a Lebanese priest who, having found himself in the village during the vattienti's ritual, it had cause to recall the *Šī'a* 'Āšūrā'.

2.3 Beirut's 'Āšūrā': The Ḥandaq al-Ġamīq flagellants

In Lebanon, the 'Āšūrā' celebrations (from the Arabic 'ašara, 'ten', meaning the tenth day of the sacred month of *Muḥarram*, the first month of the Islamic calendar) represent one of the highest and most heartfelt aspects of *Šī'a* identity and religiousness, and have been the subject of numerous and diverse studies of a historical, religious, anthropological, and political nature.

These celebrations evoke the martyrdom of the Imam Ḥusayn (d. 61/680). He was the son of the Imam 'Alī (d. 40/661), cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632), and Fāṭima (d. 11/632), daughter of the Prophet, and was brutally murdered by the caliph Yazīd's (d. 64/683) army at Karbalā' (modern Iraq), on 10 Muḥarram 61/10 October 680. Other members of the family were massacred and deported to Damascus, across the desert (Capezzone, Salati 2006, 55-8; Mervin 2014, 509; Momen 1985, 28-33; Ventura 2008, 311). Since then, and continuing until the present day, *Šī'a* all over the world celebrate these events with solemn empathy (Bausani 2007, 110; Nakash 1993, 163-78).

During the Ottoman domination in the region, public ceremonies for 'Āšūrā' were forbidden (Olmert 1987, 191-2) and took place instead inside private residences, until the French governors⁹ made them legal again.

7 The parish priest with whom the author had occasion to talk during Holy Week (2017) was later transferred to another location. The new priest, who arrived on February 2018, has participated in the procession with great enthusiasm and has not shown any negative or prohibitive behaviour towards the vattienti.

8 The author, in that moment, could not but think again about the words pronounced by the bishop at the time, mons. Saba, who had a very strict attitude towards the vattienti at around the end of the 1950s; in answering to the archpriest, who had encouraged him to soften his position of prohibition due to fears of disorder, the bishop said: "The orders have been given! If you will find yourself in trouble, I will pray for you" (Ferlaino 1990, 125; Author's translation).

9 Lebanon was put under the French mandate by the League of Nations from 1920 to 1943, the year of its independence.



Figure 5. Amal's symbol. Ḥandaq al-Ġamīq, 2015. © Author

However, the beginning of the flagellants' public processions in the south of Lebanon (the region indicated as Ġabal 'Āmil) could date back to the end of the nineteenth century, and there is also a concrete chance that these celebrations could have been introduced by Iranian immigrants who lived in the city of Nabaṭiyya in the south of the country (Ende 1979, 26-8; Tabet 2012, 403-4).

In spite of the fact that the majority of *Šī'a* religious authorities proclaim to be against bloodshed by means of practices known as *taṭbīr* (cutting the forehead with a barber's razor or the blade of a sword) and *ġanzīr* (the use of chains or bundles of knives tied together and used to hit oneself on the shoulders), such practices continue to be present in the south of Lebanon and in certain areas of Beirut and enjoy the favour of various imams.

In particular, in the Lebanese capital, there is a quarter called Ḥandaq al-Ġamīq¹⁰ situated right near the city centre, where, starting at least from

10 One of the three urban areas that the Author studied during her doctorate research. It has distinguished itself in the past for being a renowned quarter and is characterised by the presence of members of various religious confessions. Today these traits have, for the most part, disappeared: the quarter-Christian constituent abandoned it during the civil war period, and today the *Šī'a* seem to be the most evident group on the streets, which they share with Kurds, Sunni and foreigners that carry out menial jobs. The area sustained heavy



Figure 6. Flagellants. Ḥandaq al-Ġamīq, 2015. © Author

the end of the 1980s and the first years of the 1990s, numerous devotees practice scourging during a brief procession along the borders of the quarter. The majority wear a white dress (*kafan*, 'shroud' in Arabic), as well as clothes (t-shirts and sports vests) that bear the symbols of the dominant *Šī'a* party in the area, Ḥarakat Amal.

The party, as well as the imam of the *ḥusayniyya*,¹¹ declare themselves in favour of the flagellations and perform them themselves, proud of being portrayed with their wounds.

The other Lebanese *Šī'a* party, Hizbullah (the political party that has reached a foreground position in the political balance within Lebanon and in the region in recent decades), taking inspiration from a *fatwà*¹² from 1994 in which the most senior Iranian religious authority, the *āyatullah*

material damage during the war, and the beautiful Ottoman and French buildings, which it is still possible to appreciate, have never been the object of redevelopment and restoration projects. For a tale told through images see: Ṭaḥṭaḥ, Marwān "Khandaq al-Ghamiq: The Ghost of Beirut's Past", *Al-Akhbar Newspaper*, 3 June 2015, <https://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9960>. (2018-05-23).

11 The *ḥusayniyya* is the sacred place used for the '*Āšūrā*' celebrations and, specifically, for the *maḡālis* (plural of *maḡlis*), the prayer and grief sessions for the Imam Ḥusayn, his brothers in arms and the other members of the family who were killed.

12 Within Islam, a *fatwà* is a piece of specific juridical advice given by a competent religious-juridical authority. It can pertain to the most diverse aspects of a devotee's life, of society, religion, economy, etc.

Ḥāmana'ī,¹³ decided to forbid the flagellation practices, replacing them with blood donation campaigns.

The theme of the lawfulness of flagellation divides the Šī'a authorities between those who support it and those who strongly oppose it;¹⁴ by reflection, this division affects the whole Lebanese Šī'a society:

There is no such thing called *tatbīr*, it's not a part of religion, the Prophet's family did not perform it. [People] only do it to post pictures on Facebook, out of ignorance, and to have fun. (Author's unpublished interview with a professor, 16 September 2017)

Viruses, diseases, the image that we convey of ourselves: after having soiled everything [with blood], caused disgust in everyone, lost our blood, in what manner did we get something positive out of it? (Author's unpublished interview with an employee, 16 September 2017)

It is a topic that creates many divisions between the Šī'a. (Author's unpublished interview with an undergraduate student/journalist, 4 October 2017)

It comes from the word *ṭabra*, which signifies a big knife, and here it is not used a lot. With the *tatbīr* you express your own sorrow. This is a specific way to do it, but it is not a focus in regard to 'Āšūrā'. It is a thing that shows what happened to Imam Ḥusayn. (Interview to a Šī'a imam, 19 October 2017)

[The number of] people performing it is decreasing. I let fall a few drops, a symbol for what happened to Imam Ḥusayn. I started when I was four years old in Nabatiyya, and when I turned eighteen I started to understand its meaning. (Author's unpublished interview with a volunteer in a mosque, 26 October 2017).

In the next section, the focus will shift to the atmospheric dimension that connects the two rituals.

13 The specific fatwā is available at the following link: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4209/Tatbir-is-a-wrongful-and-fabricated-tradition-Imam-Khamenei>. (2018/05/23)

14 For an in-depth analysis of these subjects, see Mervin (2007 e 2014) and the website <http://tatbir.org/> (2018/05/23).

3 Affective Atmospheres and Emotions

The Monday after Palm Sunday, I scheduled an appointment with the rose and cardoon builder¹⁵ in his own storehouse, which he jokingly calls 'Cardology'. While he was busy repairing some cardoons and making new ones, an elder vattiente arrived and we continued the already-in-progress interview with him and a young graduate student from the village, who was accompanying me. I report here a piece of the discussion between us:

BUILDER Wednesday morning... Be sure of the time, do not be late!

STUDENT We will be there at seven thirty. And then you will see! [said towards the author]

AUTHOR Then we stay all morning there?

STUDENT No! Then we go around... We walk... Then I will point you out even the air changes! It will follow.

VATTIENTE People will change.

STUDENT Eh...

AUTHOR What do you mean? The air changes? What does it change?

ALL Everything! [the three interviewed overlap each other]

BUILDER When the statue comes out... the whole village changes.

AUTHOR But what is it that changes?

ALL The atmosphere... [almost with one voice]

BUILDER It becomes... You see, the atmosphere becomes more sacred, there is more harmony, the village, it becomes like one being, I do not know how to explain it right now, everything disappears, politics, football, from the most important things to...

STUDENT Politics downright disappears.

VATTIENTE Nobody talks about politics.

AUTHOR Instead, the atmosphere?

BUILDER The atmosphere is holy, it is different. You breathe a different air. I really cannot explain it right now.

STUDENT Yeah, true...

BUILDER You will see.

AUTHOR And the church's curtains, when will they close?

BUILDER Wednesday morning, yes, when... after we put away the statue.¹⁶ You prepare the altar, the curtains get closed. You place the palms - which I will go making this afternoon - and the branches. There are six needed at the church. (Author's unpublished interview with the cardoon builder, an elder vattiente, and a graduate student, 10 April 2017).

15 He is not the only one, but for years, he has been the reference point for Nocera's vattienti.

16 The tool-builder is also a palanquin bearer for the statue of the Virgin Mary.



Figure 7. The church of Annunziata, curtains' closing procedure. Nocera Terinese, 2017.
© Author

The dialogue focuses on the peculiar atmosphere that is generated during the Holy Week in Nocera and which, as reported by the interviewees, begins to emerge on Wednesday morning with *la cacciata della Madonna*, which is the day when the statue is gently removed from the shrine where it is preserved for the whole year (inside the church of Annunziata), thoroughly dusted by the palanquin bearers, and exhibited for the worship, which lasts all throughout the day and the following night.

The description of the atmosphere¹⁷ that can be inferred from the dialogue can be immediately reconnected to an article by the phenomenologist Böhme, where he seems to indicate an apparent sense of frailty, as if this (the atmosphere) was all of the things that are evoked in moments where rational explanations would seem to be impossible: “Non so come spiegarcelo mo” (I do not know how to explain it right now). Indeed, he asserts:

17 See the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8VGhojHNMM> (2018-05-23)

One has the impression that 'atmosphere' is meant to indicate something indeterminate, difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker's own speechlessness. It is almost like Adorno's 'more' which also points in evocative fashion to something beyond rational explanation and with an emphasis which suggests that only there is the essential, the aesthetically relevant to be found. (Böhme 1993, 113)

The alteration of atmosphere was also related to me multiple times in the following days by other interviewees, who added details, undertones, and various sensations:

The whole village is more emotional, it really cares about it. (Author's unpublished interview with a senior vattiente, 12 April 2017)

First off, since I start seeing the first cars parked over there (in front of the cartoon builder's storehouse), already since then I start feeling a little anxious... the emotion. I feel it inside. There does not exist a word to describe to you what I feel. It has been almost a month, I already know that this period is starting. The more it approaches... right now it is already different, there is a peculiar air. You get it in the air, only during the vattienti's period. It is not the same normal life, or daily routine.

People from Nocera working elsewhere come back. You see people with the cross in the alleys. You see things that you do not see every day, you see groups of people gathering to prepare the crowns, the flask of wine.

It is a peculiar air, you see things that you have not seen before, these little details. (Author's unpublished interview with an ecciomo, 10 April 2017)

And up until the deadline I am always eager with anticipation, who knows? Maybe I will do it, maybe not. When the period approaches, you can feel a breath, you hear those things in the streets, you meet the people that go around looking for the sparacogna to make the crown... Lent, these ten days, you see some storehouses open again, getting cleaned. After the Palms, then, something starts moving, you see it in the moments, in yourself, in the mindset. You enter the zone. (Author's unpublished interview with a former vattiente, 14 April 2017)

Böhme continues to specify how such indeterminacy refers primarily to the ontological state of the atmosphere (and not to its qualities, which, by contrast, are well describable and perceivable: holiness, emotionality, with hints of fear, tension and anxiety, in this case), meaning that we cannot be sure if the atmospheres emanate from objects (the statue of the Virgin), from places (the church with its closed black curtains, making it dark and

gloomy;¹⁸ the parked cars in front of the cartoon builder's storehouse; the reopening storehouses; the red crosses and the wine being transported in the alleys) or if, instead, they seem to be coming from the subjects who experience them (the vattienti that prepare and then hit themselves, who are seen looking for the pointy herb for the crowns, who seem to be more tense and deep in thought in the days before,¹⁹ the presence of blood linked to the vattienti, the strong and distinctive smell of blood and wine together).

We are not even sure if they can be exactly pinpointed, because it seems that they fill the space "with a certain tone of feeling like a haze" (Böhme 1993, 114). He proceeds to point out that they exist in a hybrid situation, in between an individual and their surroundings: the atmospheres cannot be considered entirely as some objective characteristics or properties of things, even if they emanate from them; nor, by contrast, do they have fully subjective traits, as it is not possible to qualify them as mindsets or the individuals' feelings, even though they themselves experience these throughout their body.

The 'body' of the flagellant, specifically, seems to absorb in itself, much like a sponge, the tensions, indeterminateness, and inexplicableness of the atmosphere that precedes Friday and Saturday's flagellations in Nocera, giving them back to us in the form of peculiar body reactions:

VATTIENTE I decided to not do the ritual and physically I had such reactions... Let's say they were annoying, I do not know, this tingling, this sensation that...

AUTHOR But did you have also goosebumps?

VATTIENTE That too, that too.

AUTHOR So then you donated blood that morning, Saturday morning [Holy Saturday], right?

VATTIENTE No, I could not make it, because it was already past the time when it was possible to donate blood, but I donated it immediately afterwards. Sure thing though, I wanted to do it that morning.

AUTHOR But that morning, did you think that the donation could, in some way, fix it momentarily - not as a substitute - but as a way to say *at least I did this*?

18 The same atmosphere of grief and gloominess is created inside the *husayniyya* with the turning off almost all the lights when, during the *mağlis*, the moment of collective crying and lamentations begins, usually accompanied by the hitting of one's own chest, thigh or cheeks.

19 During an informal conversation on Palm Sunday, one anecdote that was reported to me was that of the vattiente who lived on the floor above and who, every single night from almost ten days before the ritual, could be heard walking back and forth, along the corridor: "He then confirmed us he could not sleep well and he was very tense (and you could tell that by the look on his face!). Nowadays he still hits himself, despite being at the respectable age of sixty years old" (Author's unpublished interview with a local family, 9 April 2017).

VATTIENTE Unconsciously, probably it was just like that. But truly it has been just... Trying to bottle up a reaction, too, a physical action... that action of itch, of urge, to feel... I cannot even find the words, to feel something inside you that must come out. And this something was the blood, probably. This too has been one of the things that surprised me a little, that when I was talking to an old vattienti, he said to me "Be aware of the fact that when you will stop, you will feel this urge". If this had any influence on that reaction, I do not know. But I will assure you that...

AUTHOR And then the following year?

VATTIENTE Well, the year afterwards I did the ritual.

AUTHOR You did it then, did you hit yourself the year afterwards?

VATTIENTE Yes, I said to myself "I do not want to live with that mindset anymore". (Author's unpublished interview with a former vattiente, 14 April 2017)

In another interview, the bond between atmospheric mutations (Friday evening)²⁰ and relative physical reactions emerged even more explicitly:

ELDER VATTIENTE The body is affected by it, the body feels this change for some days.

AUTHOR And what is this sensation in the body? Is it some sort of tension?

YOUNG VATTIENTE They are emotions that cannot even be described.

ELDER VATTIENTE In Nocera, in dialect, they say it raises *o pielo*.

YOUNG VATTIENTE *O pilu caninu*.

STUDENT Goosebumps! [laughing]

YOUNG VATTIENTE Already when you hear the statue coming out with the music, the legs already... (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, a young vattiente, and a graduate student, 11 April 2017)

Thus, the flagellant's body is not merely a body that receives and absorbs the atmospheres, but one that itself contributes to creating them:

20 After an entire year of being preserved behind closed doors, on Holy Friday, in the evening, the statue of Madonna is brought outside the church of Annunziata. The whole village partakes with great engagement in this event. People gather in front of the religious building's main door, in respectful and appropriate silence, and await the exit of the statue, which is brought slowly outside by the palanquin bearers. At that precise moment, the band begins to play a slow and heartfelt funeral march, *La Jone* (musical composition by Enrico Petrella https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sTg_RRogms [2018-05-23]), which contributes to creating an atmosphere that is dense and full of anticipation. Links to some videos taken during the exiting of the statue are provided here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoCnaMhC4C4> (2018-05-23).



Figure 8. Black flags. Handaq al-Gamiq, 2015. © Author

We can say that atmospheres are generated by bodies – of multiple types – affecting one another as some form of ‘envelopment’ is produced. Atmospheres do not float free from the bodies that come together and apart to compose situations. (Anderson 2009, 80)

According to Anderson, then, the atmospheres can be described as some sort of affective excess, like a spill-over of the affects located in that space. They are first generated from the bodies, they emanate by the bodies, but then the atmospheres surpass the bodies, gaining full autonomy in the surrounding space. Böhme, moreover, suggests that the affective atmospheres are what fills the space and the distance between object (from which they emanate) and subject (who perceives them): they are “the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived” (1993, 122).

In Nocera’s case, the atmospheres arise like an alteration in the air that can be sensed distinctly (“The change in the air”, “you can breathe a different air”, “I feel it inside”, “I know that it starts in that period”, “there is a peculiar air”, “you enter the air”, “something starts moving”, “you enter the zone”, as related in the interviews) and are created by tangible



Figure 9. Balconies. Ḥandaq al-Ġamiq, 2015. © Author

signs (the flask of wine, the crosses in the alleys, the open storehouses, the sparacogna, the vattienti's cars parked in front of the cardoon builder's storehouse), which are objects that completely fill space that would otherwise simply be 'normal', daily routine space.

Moreover, as Brennan notes: "Affects are not received or registered in a vacuum" (2004, 6) and those who describe the atmosphere that precedes the flagellants' ritual are aware of how the space becomes filled with details and peculiarities as well as affects. Brennan, in her book, also brings forth the idea that affects, and thus atmospheres, can be transmitted between individuals. In particular, she uses the concept of *entrainment*, of a chemical nature (68-70), which operates through smell - or to be more precise, through some smells of which we are not aware (pheromones) - and that is described as "critical in how we 'feel the atmosphere'" (2004, 9).

Particularly relevant to an analysis of the atmospheres that the vattienti describe is, again, the piece by Anderson, who resumes and expands Böhme's theories and reports that:



Figure 10. Black spaces. Hındaq al-Ġamīq, 2015. © Author

On the one hand, atmospheres are real phenomena. They ‘envelop’ and thus press on a society ‘from all sides’ with a certain force. On the other, they are not necessarily sensible phenomena. (2009, 78)

The atmosphere of the Holy Week in Nocera envelopes and constricts whoever might find themselves immersed in it, acting with a strength that causes undeniable, concrete, and specific physical reactions (the goosebumps, the itchiness, the annoyance, the tingling) on the vattienti’s legs, but also fosters a mindset of anticipation among the devotees (the wait for the statue to be taken out of the shrine on Wednesday morning, the wait for it to be brought out of the church on Friday evening, the wait for the first vattienti to arrive). Everything happens within Saturday’s atmospheres:

It is as if the strong ritual reach of the Saturday, the emotional, dramatic, social charge that was expressed during the day, voids the Easter one, delivering it to a suffuse, half-festive dimension. The bells ring incessantly, well-dressed people hasten to church, and most of them linger to look at the cherished, nostalgic haematic traces of a festivity that appears to be already gone. (Faeta 2007, 172; Author’s translation)

On the same page, Anderson continues to affirm that atmospheres can interrupt, unsettle, or persecute people (the air/the people that change, the indecision about hitting themselves that persists until the last minute for some), places (the village changes) or objects, and that they express some sense of vagueness, of something badly defined and thus undefined, something that goes beyond a rational explanation and that stops inescapably in front of the door of the inexpressible. All of this harkens back to the persistence of what the author heard reported in the interviews over and over: the indescribable nature of the emotions that were felt, the inability to find the right words to explain them, and the redundant use of adverbs that underlines their uncertainty (“unconsciously”, “probably”, “let’s call it that”, “I do not know”, “I do not know how to explain it to you”, “you will see for yourself”, “you will notice it”, in the interviewees’ words).

This topic also emerged during the interviews realised during the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in Beirut during her doctorate research between 2015 and 2018. These interviewees referred to the same concepts listed by interviewees in Nocera, namely the impossibility of expressing what is felt during the period of ‘*Āšūrā*’ and the entrance into its specific atmosphere:

Three or four days before, everything is adorned in black. Immediately we plunge into the atmosphere, the fervour. There is a lot of enthusiasm, the black colour, you can see that there is sorrow. This atmosphere is beautiful. (Author’s unpublished interview with an employee of a Lebanese telephone company, 19 September 2017)

I do not know how to describe the mindset to you. [It is] a feeling that is really impossible to describe. (Author’s unpublished interview with an undergraduate student/journalist, 4 October 2017)

You can hear the *laṭmiyyāt*²¹ at high volume, you can feel that these are really different days, of spirituality. Bit by bit... we get inside the atmosphere, we prepare ourselves three months prior, or a year before. (Author’s unpublished interview with an undergraduate student/photographer, 10 October 2017)

21 These are compositions of mournful music and specific hymns dedicated to the *Šī’a* martyr, which are listened to during the whole period of ‘*Āšūrā*’. Some young people play them at maximum volume in their cars and the two *Šī’a* political parties play them on the streets of the quarters they control. Said hymns have the peculiar function of giving rhythm to the ceremony in which the devotees, male and female, hit themselves, loudly and with strength, on the chest, in a sign of grief for the Imam Ḥusayn (this is also called *laṭmiyya*, singular, from the Arabic verb *laṭama*, to beat or hit). They are also called *nadbiyyāt*, from the verb *nadaba*, to cry over the death of somebody, or to make a funeral eulogy for somebody.

A week before they start with the [black] flags, immediately it is 'Āšūrā' atmosphere. The sadness comes suddenly, by itself. (Author's unpublished interview with an insurance agent, 11 February 2018)

Anderson again comes to our aid, returning to the ideas of the phenomenologist Dufrenne in affirming that:

atmospheres are unfinished because of their constitutive openness to being taken up in experience. Atmospheres are indeterminate. They are resources that become elements within sense experience. (2009, 79)

The atmospheres become concrete, then, in the moment when they become an experience (of the senses). The vattienti reach the climax of this experience during the self-flagellation and the voluntary effusion of blood.

The following paragraph will attempt to link the category of atmosphere to that of agency, and in order to do so, will follow a shared path with the *Šī'a* flagellants of Beirut.

4 When text becomes flesh and flesh becomes text: The flagellants' agency

As noted above, over the years the religious establishment has always condemned the vattienti's self-flagellation. This conflictual dimension, still relevant nowadays, has surfaced in some interviews; here, the vattienti are seen by the author to be much like the cultural/religious rival of the Church:

It's a matter of anarchy: the vattiente exists separately from the church, from politics, from everything. (Author's unpublished interview with a senior vattiente, 11 April 2017)

We are autonomous, this is the thing that annoys the church the most, that they cannot control us. We escape such control. Besides, it is not like all of them [referring to the vattienti] assiduously frequent the church anyway. (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 11 April 2017)

The same vattiente, a couple of days earlier, affirmed:

I can see that now religious tourism is trendy, that the church is getting closer and closer. I find it annoying that the church is getting closer to the vattienti. The church could never stand them, they declared war on



Figure 11. Vattiente and parish priest. Nocera Terinese, 2017. © Author

us. And now why do you think they want to get closer? It is again the same old story of evangelising the others, to purify – they want to purify this ritual from being almost pagan to Christian. (Author’s unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 8 April 2017)

The Church, sure enough, suspects that the ritual could have pagan oriental origins. In a note, the then-Diocesan Ordinary, mons. F. Palatucci, described the ritual during the period 1971-1975 as follows:

The hardest nut to crack is that it is still a certain procession, performed in Nocera Terinese, on Holy Saturday. It lasts almost all day and is well-known among ethnologists across Europe, who come to study it, seeing in it a testament of the survival of magic pagan rituals to beg, in spring, for the land’s fertility. The most off-key note of the procession, besides the excessive duration, with its stops and libations, is the adhering of young ‘vattienti’, who, each preceded by a red-dressed young man with a little cross wrapped in red on his shoulders (the ‘Ecce Homo’),

create a commotion throughout the processional parade, in revealing underwear, hitting themselves on their thighs until they bleed with cork discs, which have glass shards attached to them. (Ferlaino 1990, 151; Author's translation)

The 'hardest nut to crack', the 'most off-key note', autonomy, and anarchy. It would seem that a specific dimension of the vattienti is being outlined: they can freely express their agency, defined as the human capacity to act (Ahearn 2002, 18), through self-flagellation. The voluntary effusion of blood can be read as a text, produced by these bodies, which expresses their agency, if the word 'text' can be considered to have a broader meaning:

Such is very clear in all those texts 'in act', 'in situation', which in our perception do not detach themselves from the flow of life but which nonetheless answer to determined formalities, such as, for example, the spatial and architectural complex, or the different 'categories' that make up our daily living: a 'conversation', a 'prayer', a 'match (at any game)', 'making lunch', 'going for a walk', 'doing shopping', participating in an 'event', a 'demonstration', a 'fight'. (Sedda 2006, 51; Author's translation)

But how does this express, essentially, the vattiente's agency? I argue it does so in different but intertwined ways:

1. Satisfying a concrete physical need to hit oneself, as stated by the vattiente during the interview;
2. Expressing a vow and/or following a family tradition (the vow is private and secret, and generally linked to a tragedy, a disease, an accident, a serious personal or family problem; however, there are also those who hit themselves to follow a family tradition from generations past);
3. Choosing a personal route (all the vattienti have different starting points in the village, depending on the location of the storehouse - where they prepare themselves -and slightly change their itinerary depending on the houses of friends/family that they intend to greet). What surfaces, then, is the agency's geographic dimension, which expresses itself through the choice of additional, unique, and personal stopping places. The vattiente's route establishes permanent and unavoidable stops, but at the same time, he is free to decide the journey time and the itinerary. Crucial is the precise point, at a highly significant place, where each vattiente decides to meet the statue of the Virgin Mary.
4. Resisting and opposing specific religious prohibitions and, sometimes, the intervention of the police forces, elements that are here interpreted as a 'structure' that binds and cages the vattiente's free expression of agency. However, regardless of this, the ritual itself



Figure 12. Blood marks on the Church of Annunziata. Nocera Terinese, 2017. © Author

has never disappeared; the vattienti have always reacted to the pressures from above. In this case, then, the agency can be read using the lens of the opposition to social prohibitions (the Church and the Police), but also to the reprimands, expressed with concern or with coercive force, of friends and family.

5. Admonishing and punishing invasive observers (very well-known are the stories about some vattienti who have used the rose or the cartoon to turn away the photographers' cameras to prevent them from recording, or who have spurted them with blood).
6. Leaving haematic signs on the streets, on the churches, on the jamb of some houses, or on the walls, which in dialect is expressed by the phrases *lasciari 'u signu/lasciari 'a cona* (Faeta 2007, 177). Each vattiente decides where to leave his haematic traces: on the doorsteps of the houses, on the walls, on the churches' side or steps, at the entrance of commercial activities and storehouses, on the village convent, on the main entrance of the prison. These haematic signatures follow the vattiente's familial and friendship relationships, creating nets of coalition and generating social and political connections inside Nocera Terinese. Signing little kids or their own partner, moreover, is considered to be a good omen, which can be contrasted with the punishment towards the invasive observer.

To continue to hit oneself means also to affirm the flagellation's innate value, in opposition to those who would want to see this practice flow into (and, so, dilute) blood donations. When the author tried to ask whether it was possible to substitute the voluntary effusion of blood with a donation, the answers all expressed the absolute impossibility of doing so:

It is not the same thing, because it is not the same thing. I am free to give away the blood, to throw it away. (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 8 April 2017)

It goes along with it, but it does not replace it. One donates, and one hits oneself. (Author's unpublished interview with a previous young vattiente, 8 April 2017)

They are two different things with different meanings. That blood is shed for the Virgin Mary, it is different. (Author's unpublished interview with the cartoon builder, 10 April 2017)

There is a thing that I want to state clearly, I am a vattienti's fan. I hear saying: "Why do not they go to donate blood?". Our vattienti are all blood donors, when something happens, they immediately volunteer, if they see news on the phone, or on television, they volunteer. I hear critics, foreigners, they do not know who they are, how they are living, who are these vattienti. (Author's unpublished interview with a school teacher, 12 April 2017)

The same answers were given to me in Lebanon:

You cannot say that this [blood donation] could be a substitute, there is no connection. [The simple donation] lacks the point, the ultimate purpose. (Interview to a *Šī'a* imam, 19 October 2017)

It is not a substitute, there is not a substitute. Blood donation does not have any virtue, there is nothing that could be like *taṭbīr*. (Author's unpublished interview with a cook, 6 November 2017)

The flagellation assumes, then, a key importance, both for Nocera's vattienti and for Beirut's flagellants.²² Specifically, in Nocera, it represents

²² It should be noted here that while, in the small community of Nocera, the approval given by society to the vattienti is almost unanimous, in Lebanon the majority of the *Šī'a* consider themselves averse to the flagellation practices and have at this point accepted blood donation as a substitute practice. For more on this, see Faḡlullah (2004, 27-51).

an irreplaceable social and religious occasion, an essential moment that goes beyond the vow's private familiarity but:

allows the flagellant to build, inside a potential circle of friends and allies, a proper net of social relations, ampler and more cohesive, as large and effective as ritual *performance*. (Faeta 2007, 179; Author's translation)

5 Conclusions

I close this essay with some final words from one of the ritual's protagonists:

If I donate blood three times a year, the fourth time I should be free to do whatever I want with it, right? (Author's unpublished interview with an elder vattiente, 11 April 2017)

Focussing on the affective atmospheres and on the vattienti's agency has allowed us to describe the latter from a point of view that re-humanises them and gives them back to us as figures who act inside the society from which they come from and which moulds them (society 'makes' the vattiente); as diligent defenders of their ritual, their devotion, their (half-) secret vow, their texts made out of blood and rosemary, and their determination to oppose any prohibition, critic or altered representation that offends them (the vattiente 'makes' society).

In particular, the 'affective atmospheres' well convey the tangle of tensions that goes through the vattiente's body, as well as the labyrinth of emotions and affects that he himself has to go through. They give us back, then, a flagellant who acts with all of his humanity and frailness, who erupts in tears, while he drops to his knees in front of the Virgin Mary's statue and prays in silence. He does not even talk.

The atmosphere is, at first, excited, while in the distance can be heard the 'tac tac tac' of the hits with roses and cardoons on their legs, can be seen the red cross that 'runs' on the horizon, all signs that the vattiente is coming; then the anticipation grows in front of the small patch of asphalt left empty by the crowd and by the palanquin bearers in front of the statue where, finally, the vattiente performs the ritual. No one talks. Everyone observes.

Now the atmosphere is hanging heavy, made of silence, and the ritual appears delicate, respectful, and precise. Not one hit more than necessary. The vattiente stands back up and, in the same way that he came, he runs away. No more violence, no torment of the flesh. The atmosphere deflates.

'The agency', on the other hand, gives us back a vattiente in his full capacity to act, to resist the structure that would dominate and dilute him into a Catholicism purged of the same paganism that stands as its ancestor.

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