

Maradona, secular god of the Mediterranean: sporting legend and identity cohesion in post-championship Naples

By

Luisa Nardi

Department of Legal Sciences, University of Salento, Italy.

Abstract

This paper examines the figure of Diego Armando Maradona as a “secular deity” in the collective imagination of Naples, exploring his role as a sporting legend capable of generating a sense of identity, especially considering the recent victories (2023–2025 league titles) achieved by the Neapolitan team. Through an interdisciplinary analysis drawing on the sociology of the imaginary and religion, the article investigates how Maradona has become an imaginary institution for the Neapolitan community – a symbolic reference whose popular veneration has affinities with the religious phenomenon, while remaining within the secular sphere. The key theoretical references are outlined first: from Mircea Eliade's concept of homo religiosus (1957) to Cornelius Castoriadis' idea (1975) of the imaginary institution of society, from the anthropological persistence of the sacred in Julien Rieus (2008) to the modern forms of secular sacredness described by Edgar Morin (1951), Roger Caillois (1939), Michel Maffesoli (2022), Gilbert Durand (1960) and Domenico Secundulfo (2019). Subsequently, the empirical analysis focuses on the socio-cultural context of Naples: the symbolic “sanctification” of Maradona in the 1980s, fuelled by the need for redemption in southern Italy, is reconstructed, and the ritual and narrative practices (murals, altars, profane relics, sacralising chants) with which the Neapolitan community keeps the myth alive are described. It is highlighted how the triumph in the 2023 and then 2025 championships represented a reactivation of this myth, rekindling collective devotion to Maradona as the city's secular guardian deity. In the Conclusions, the link between the imaginary and the sacred in Neapolitan culture, a historical and symbolic crossroads of Mediterranean cultures, is reflected upon: the “cult” of Maradona demonstrates how, in the post-secular era, sporting symbols can perform cohesive and identity-forming functions similar to those once performed by deities or patron saints, acting as catalysts of meaning and community belonging.

Introduction

Mediterranean cultures, with their deep layers of religious and civil symbols, often blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane. The region has been called a crossroads of civilizations where ancient and modern myths coexist, giving rise to *imaginary institutions* shared symbolic constructs that shape communal identity (Castoriadis, 1975). Mediterranean imaginations frequently blend traditional religiosity with new secular myths tied to family, politics, art, or sport.

Naples is a prime example. With a strong cultural identity, it has a history of sacralizing profane symbols and

incorporating charismatic figures into a secular pantheon. The patron saint San Gennaro whose blood miraculously liquefies has long been central to Neapolitan religious imagination, serving as community glue and an urban totem. Yet alongside such official cults, contemporary Naples has developed a fervent secular cult: that of Diego Armando Maradona, the Argentine football legend who led Napoli to its first major victories in the late 1980s.

The veneration of Maradona quickly became a socio-cultural phenomenon with its own rituals and symbolism. Huge murals of *El Pibe de Oro* adorn working-class districts; secular altars display his image and even profane “relics” (like a lock of his hair or his number 10 jersey) are cherished by fans. Maradona’s cult coexists with that of San Gennaro in a unique syncretism. The playful nickname “San Gennarmando” merging the saint and the football “god” captures how sacred meaning transferred to a secular icon performing a similar role of communal hope and consolation.

This article aims to analyze this phenomenon through the sociology of imaginary and of religion. The research questions are twofold: How did Maradona become an “imaginary institution” for Naples, strengthening its identity and cohesion? And to what extent does this sporting myth assume sacred traits while remaining in a secular context? The analysis considers both the historical period when Maradona played in Naples (1984–1991), when the football hero was viewed almost as a civic savior, and subsequent developments, including the mythic revival after his death in 2020 and the third and fourth Neapolitan championships in 2023 and 2025.

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach. We conducted visual ethnography and photographic documentation of Maradona-related Street art, shrines, and public memorabilia in Naples. Multiple field visits (at distinct periods) were carried out to capture evolving commemorative practices, and these were complemented by in-depth interviews with local fans and cultural experts. Archival and media sources (such as local newspaper archives, club records, and online news outlets) were also analyzed to trace Maradona’s rise as a mythic figure in Neapolitan culture. The collected data were subjected to thematic content analysis to identify recurring motifs of popular devotion, identity, and social cohesion, following established qualitative methods

Theoretical framework: collective imagination and secular sacredness

To frame the secular sacralisation of Maradona in Naples, we first outline the intersection of collective imagination and the sacred. Sociology of imaginary, in dialogue with religious anthropology, offers insight into how symbols and myths provide cohesion and meaning to communities.

Mircea Eliade argued that humans are naturally *homo religiosus*, inherently drawn to the sacred. Julien Ries likewise sees the sacred as a permanent dimension of human consciousness a constant openness to a “more” of meaning beyond the surface of reality (Eliade, 1976; Ries, 2008). Even modern secular people retain this need for meaning, which new forms of sacred myth can fulfill.

Roger Caillois noted that manifestations of the sacred are not confined to official religion; a festive sacredness also emerges in collective rituals, including sports. A major football match can resemble liturgy: the stadium becomes a secular temple, fan chants sound like litany, and team colors take on totemic significance. In big games the line between sacred and profane blurs as fans experience communal ecstasy akin to a religious festival (Caillois, 2001).

Cornelius Castoriadis defined the social imaginary as a creative force by which society “institutes” itself, forging shared narratives, values and symbols that undergird identity. In traditional societies these imaginary institutions were often religious; in modern ones they can be secular (the nation, progress, science, or even a football team and its hero). Domenico Secondufo speaks of a deep social imagination myths, fantasies, desires and fears that operate beneath rationality and shapes culture. For example, a community’s yearning for redemption can crystallize in the imaginary figure of a savior hero (Castoriadis, 1995; Secondufo, 2019).

Gilbert Durand emphasized that humans create symbols and myths to transform reality into meaningful narratives, helping to confront fundamental fears like death. Edgar Morin similarly argued that myth and the sacred “transfigure” the fact of death, providing hope of victory over it (Morin, 2002). Secular heroes and martyrs can fulfill this function too, offering symbolic immortality. In sports, a champion’s cycle of defeat and victory can serve as a metaphor for death and resurrection, sparking a collective catharsis (Durand, 2013).

Michel Maffesoli observed a postmodern nostalgia for the sacred: as modernity’s grand narratives faded, people sought new tribal rituals and shared symbols. This sacredness often appears outside church for instance, in fan communities where an emotional and identity-based communion forms. Naples’ fan base can be seen as an “urban tribe,” united by quasi-familial bonds and sustained by rituals (chants, choreographed displays, pilgrimages to the stadium) (Maffesoli, 2022).

In summary, several key elements emerge for analyzing Maradona as a secular “divinity” of Naples:

- **Permanence of the sacred:** Even in secular times, people retain a need for sacredness and create new

Maradona, secular god of the Mediterranean: sporting legend and identity cohesion in post-championship Naples

objects of veneration (Eliade, 1976; Ries, 2008). In the Mediterranean, this sacred substratum easily transfers to charismatic popular figures.

- **Imaginary institutions and identity:** Communities construct identity around shared symbols and myths (Castoriadis, 1995; Secundulfo, 2019). A sports champion can become an institutional symbol and part of local identity.
- **Myth, ritual and cohesion:** Myths are sustained by rituals that affirm their power (Durand, 2013; Caillois, 2001). Emotional participation in festivals and celebrations strengthens communal bonds (Maffesoli, 2022).
- **Symbolic sacredness with irony:** In secular cults, participants know the “sacred” is metaphorical. Fans operate in a symbolic realm and often with irony (e.g. jokingly dubbing Maradona “San Gennarmando”), yet they still partake with sincere passion and gratitude. This dual consciousness of irony and belief is characteristic of the postmodern sacred.

Maradona in Naples in the 1980s: the birth of a popular legend

Maradona’s arrival in Naples on 5 July 1984 was a historic event. More than 70,000 fans crowded into the Stadio San Paolo to welcome the new superstar. Naples at that time desperately needed a resurgence: years of economic hardship and southern marginalization had fostered a deep sense of inferiority, and the Napoli team had never won a league title (northern clubs like Juventus, Milan, Inter dominated Serie A).

From the start, Maradona embodied hope. Coming from a poor barrio of Buenos Aires, he immediately identified with the underprivileged of Naples, declaring he wanted to be “the idol of the poor children of Naples, because they are like I was in Argentina.” This endeared him to the city’s most humble residents and built a charismatic bond with the populace. In the following seasons Maradona led Napoli to unprecedented success: the club’s first Scudetto (league championship) in 1987, the UEFA Cup in 1989, and a second Scudetto achievement the community celebrated as miracles. As anthropologist Marino Niola noted, Maradona’s goals were like the miracles of San Gennaro in how they “rebuilt the city’s identity,” giving Neapolitans a renewed pride. The celebrations after the 1987 title were legendary: crowds flooded the streets, horns blared nonstop, balconies hung with blue flags, and Maradona’s image was paraded aloft like that of a liberator.

One emblematic sign of how transcendent that victory felt: a banner at the city cemetery read “*You don’t know what you missed!*” implying that the joy of that triumph was so unique that even the dead were unfortunate to miss it. This anecdote shows that the Scudetto was perceived almost as a miraculous event that altered Naples’s destiny.

Maradona’s feats and persona quickly took on mythic proportions. His extraordinary skill earned him divine epithets: his left foot was dubbed the “foot of God,” and he was even nicknamed *DIOS* (a blend of *Dios*, God, with his jersey number 10). A famous graffiti proclaimed, “Maradona è meglio ’e San Gennaro” (“Maradona is better than St. Gennaro”). Though laced with Neapolitan irony, such expressions reflected a genuine sentiment Maradona was being elevated to the status of a new secular patron saint of the city.

His “sanctification” was reflected in countless objects, images and rituals. A massive mural of Maradona in the Spanish Quarter became a site where fans light candles and leave offerings, earning the nickname “the Maradona chapel.” A local bar set up a shrine with a lock of Maradona’s hair preserved as a holy relic, labeled “miraculous hair of Maradona.” These quasi-religious practices show how fans created secular shrines and relics akin to saint worship. Many named their children Diego, kept ticket stubs as relics, and even murmured prayers to Maradona during tense matches.

Championship celebrations in those years resembled religious festivals, complete with processions of cars, communal dancing, and chants like joyful psalms. The collective euphoria fused individuals into one what Durkheim described as “collective effervescence,” like a revival meeting.

Media narratives further deified Maradona. Commentators described him as “blessed by heaven” and destined for greatness. His exploits such as the “Goal of the Century” against England in the 1986 World Cup were enshrined in Naples’s memory as proof of his superhuman ability. Even his infamous “Hand of God” goal became part of his legend, adding a roguish, anti-establishment dimension to his image as the underdog’s champion.

By the late 1980s, Maradona was firmly ensconced in Naples’s civic pantheon as a symbol of identity and cohesion. His name was spoken with reverence everywhere; his likeness displayed on countless walls. Fans greeted each goal he scored with an almost religious fervor thousands of scarves lifted to the sky in thanks. In the Curva B (the hardcore fan section), the ultras sang songs proclaiming their love for him (one famous chant repeats, “I saw Maradona... I’m in love!”). The adoration was virtually unconditional: Maradona was revered as a king

and even a deity of football in the city.

From the fall of the champion to posthumous cult

Like any mythic hero, Maradona's saga included a fall and subsequent transfiguration. The early 1990s saw the hero's decline: in 1991 Maradona was banned for cocaine use and left Naples amid scandal (accusations ranged from Camorra ties to personal excesses). The idol's collapse was a shock the "god" had revealed human weaknesses. Many fans felt it was a betrayal and the end of a dream. Yet over time a forgiving narrative took hold: Maradona began to be viewed as a martyr of the South who had tried to bring Naples's glory and was "sacrificed" in the process. Some believed his punishment was orchestrated by northern powers to humble Naples. This victim narrative only deepened local affection: Maradona was recast as a secular martyr who "died" for his people's aspirations and therefore merited veneration and absolution.

After Maradona's departure, Napoli sank into obscurity (even bankruptcy and relegation by the early 2000s), which made the Maradona years shine even brighter in retrospect. Each fresh disappointment on the field revived nostalgia for that golden age. Stories of "when Maradona was here" were passed down like folklore. The giant mural in the Spanish Quarter remained an urban shrine, tended by devotees. On Maradona's birthday or on the Scudetto anniversary, fans still gather there to sing in his honor, light blue flares, and renew the mythic memory.

Maradona's apotheosis in the Neapolitan imagination was cemented by two recent events: his death in November 2020 and Napoli's Scudetto victory in 2023. Maradona's death on 25 November 2020 plunged the city into grief comparable to losing a beloved family member. Thousands left flowers and candles at his mural and at the stadium. The city council promptly voted to rename the San Paolo Stadium after him, officially installing him in Naples's civic pantheon. Such an honor renaming a major stadium for a still-recent player signified the city's acknowledgement of Maradona as a secular patron. Even the local Church paid respects: at a memorial Mass, one priest remarked that Maradona "brought joy to this city," effectively recognizing his role as an intercessor of communal happiness.

In May 2023, Napoli clinched its third Scudetto (33 years after the last one Maradona won). The celebrations immediately recalled those of 1987 and reactivated Maradona's myth. His image was everywhere: giant posters, flags, and banners bore Maradona's face; the stadium (now bearing his name) echoed with chants of "Diego! Diego!" During the decisive match, fans even sang "La Mano de Dios" (the song honoring Maradona's famous goal), as if to invoke his spirit. Fans and media explicitly linked the triumph to Maradona: commentators declared

the title had returned to “Maradona’s city,” and the team captain dedicated the victory to him, imagining Maradona rejoicing from above. Many younger fans wore Maradona’s number 10 jerseys during the celebrations as a tribute and felt closer to the legend. Jokes circulated that a “hand from heaven” (Maradona’s) helped secure the win. In essence, a new success brought the old myth roaring back, affirming its vitality. Supporters described the 2023 championship (followed by another in 2025) as the repeat of a miracle after 33 years, again using religious language and even invoking San Gennaro in their exuberance.

Maradona as a secular deity: sacredness and social cohesion

The evidence shows that Maradona has indeed taken on the role of a secular deity in Naples, an almost divine figure worshipped outside formal religion. In sociological terms, Maradona became an overarching collective symbol representing the values, hopes, and identity of Naples. Key aspects of this secular sacredness and its cohesive effect include:

- **Salvific and identity function:** Maradona was viewed as a savior who symbolically redeemed Naples from national inferiority. Defeating the wealthy northern clubs felt like historic revenge for the South. He personified the underdog champion overturning the established powers, which massively boosted local pride. Being Neapolitan came to mean sharing in the glory of having had Maradona as a leader. People still say “We had Maradona” with pride. His story gave the city a narrative of triumph over stigma and hardship.
- **Rituality and community cohesion:** The cult of Maradona has spawned secular rituals that bind the community. Spontaneous gatherings at his mural, annual commemorations, and stadium chants (a kind of secular liturgy) bring together people of all backgrounds in a common devotion. In this way, Maradona worship functions as a civil religion in Naples: it has sacred sites (the stadium, murals), rituals (chants, “pilgrimages” to these sites, championship fêtes), and believers (fans and citizens who keep his memory). Crucially, participants know it is symbolic many acknowledge that a football victory cannot fix Naples’s real issues, yet they also affirm that “Maradona helped Naples symbolically.” This conscious irony does not dilute their passion; an awareness of symbolism coexists with heartfelt devotion, bolstering social unity.
- **Material objectification of the myth:** The cult is made tangible through objects and places. Shrines and murals, the renamed stadium, and cherished memorabilia (jerseys, posters, figurines) all give the myth

Maradona, secular god of the Mediterranean: sporting legend and identity cohesion in post-championship Naples

physical form. Fans touch Maradona's statue or kiss his jersey just as believers might with a saint's statue. Relics of Maradona (a hair lock, his jersey, a signed ball) are treated with reverence, making him "present" through tangible tokens. When Napoli beat Coppa Italia in 2020, players carried a huge Maradona poster on the field to symbolically include him in the triumph reinforcing the idea that he watches over the team's fortunes.

- **Continuity and renewal:** The myth has not faded; it continually adapts and gains new meanings. The 2023 title (and the subsequent 2025 one) reactivated Maradona's cult for a generation that never saw him play. Naples displayed its devotion in those celebrations with special tributes giant light displays of Maradona's face in the city and the stadium lit in Argentina's colors. The community actively renews the myth to keep it relevant. People even jokingly speak of a "Maradonian Church." (In Argentina, some fans established an *Iglesia Maradoniana*, and in Naples the most fervent supporters are humorously called "Maradona's witnesses.") Exaggeration underscores a truth: many feel a duty to pass on Maradona's story to the youth, so that this defining myth of Naples is not forgotten.

Ultimately, Maradona in Naples fulfills all the classic functions of a societal myth: he provided a founding heroic narrative (mythopoietic), embodied core values like uplifting the downtrodden and *scugnizzaria* (a Neapolitan term referring to a street-smart youth subculture often associated with resilience and urban creativity) (street-kid cleverness turned virtue) (axiological), stood at the center of community rituals (ritual), and united and distinguished the group's identity (identity). As a secular deity he is invoked, thanked, and celebrated like a patron saint only his "miracles" occur on the pitch and in the hearts of fans.

It should also be noted that Maradona's cult, while strongest in Naples, has universal aspects. Maradona is a global icon, but Naples offered uniquely fertile ground for this popular sacredness. The city's cultural traits strong communal bonds, a tradition of venerating patron saints, a syncretic folk religiosity meant people readily applied familiar religious practices to a secular figure. Votive shrines, yearly rituals, dedicated chants: the typical patterns of saint worship were extended almost naturally to Maradona. This exemplifies "open sanctity": sanctity understood not only theologically but as a social construct, which can include non-religious figures if a community deems them salvific. Maradona's case illustrates this postmodern dynamic: elements of the sacred resurface in secular spheres, confirming that even in a secular age, people continue to create myths and rituals that give collective life meaning.

Conclusion

The case of Maradona as Naples's secular god reveals broader insights into the interplay of imagination and the sacred in contemporary Mediterranean culture, and the role a sports myth can play in community cohesion.

Firstly, it confirms that the sacred understood as an extraordinary source of meaning does not vanish in secularized societies but rather mutates and relocates. As Eliade noted, *homo religiosus* persists even in modern man (Eliade, 1976). In a city with a strong Catholic tradition like Naples, religious fervor found an alternative outlet in Maradona. This did not displace the traditional cult of San Gennaro (which remains devoutly observed) but complemented it and enriched the symbolic landscape. Mediterranean culture often mixes old and new forms of sacredness in this inclusive way. Maradona effectively became a “civic saint” of Naples – a patron-like figure shared even by the non-religious – uniting believers and non-believers alike. This exemplifies a Mediterranean tendency to embody collective values in charismatic figures who can unite people across usual divides.

Secondly, Maradona's cult shows how the collective imagination can symbolically address real social tensions. The North–South rivalry, the working class's need for redemption, the quest for dignity for a stigmatized city – all these concrete issues were channeled into the Maradona myth and found cathartic expression there. Imagination provided a symbolic victory to counterbalance material hardship: Naples may have remained poor and troubled, but through football it could imagine itself triumphant and significant, at least for a moment. As Durand suggested, myths transfigure harsh reality by giving it ideal meaning (Durand, 2013). Maradona allowed Neapolitans to envision a story in which the last could become first, bolstering morale during tough times. People even interpreted sporting success as a kind of providential sign.

Thirdly, the Maradona phenomenon highlights the playful-festive dimension in regenerating social bonds. Great Napoli victories – and even the weekly ritual of the match – provide occasions for communal gathering and joy that reinforce the social fabric. In Naples, football and its myth serve as a common language that everyone can share. The secular celebrations for the Scudetto (such as in 2023) resembled traditional religious feasts, taking over public space with collective rites (streets decked with flags, exuberant motorcades of fans). In effect, football has partly taken over the role of religion as the chief occasion for mass celebration. This doesn't imply Neapolitans have lost faith (religiosity remains high), but rather that football functions as a parallel civil religion with its own calendar, rituals and “saints.”

Finally, from a methodological perspective, the study of Maradona's myth underlines the need for an

Maradona, secular god of the Mediterranean: sporting legend and identity cohesion in post-championship Naples

interdisciplinary lens. Only by combining sociology, anthropology and religious studies can we grasp both its material-social aspects (the city's history, class dynamics, fan culture) and its symbolic-psychological aspects (needs for faith, hope, community). The notion of "secular sanctity" sits at this intersection. Maradona's story shows how secular sanctification arises from a specific context – a collective construction blending elements of war and play, victory and redemption, saint and champion. Crucially, the community is self-aware in this construction. Maradona's sanctification was carried out with a conscious wink, giving the cult an ironic tone: deep gratitude is expressed with a smile. Neapolitans know they have created a myth, but that awareness doesn't diminish it – if anything it enhances it, allowing them to embrace the myth playfully rather than dogmatically.

In sum, Maradona's status as Naples's secular god exemplifies how even today (especially in the Mediterranean) communities can forge secular forms of sacredness and collective identity. In an era often seen as fragmented and disenchanted, this case demonstrates the persistence – or resurgence – of communal religiosity outside official church structures. By elevating Maradona's icon, Neapolitans created an "imaginary institution" (Castoriadis) an informal yet powerful reference point that has inspired behavior, cemented bonds, and generated culture (e.g., the street art and literature inspired by Maradona).

Indeed, the cult of Maradona in Naples functions as a kind of civil religion where the sacred and profane entwined. The energy of religious sentiment, to invoke Eliade, has been channeled into a new sphere by familiar means: the tension and jubilant release of a last-minute winning goal strongly resemble the anticipation and relief of a miraculous event. (It's no coincidence Neapolitans dubbed winning the championship a "secular miracle.") Through his rise, fall, and redemption story, Diego Armando Maradona became the city's ultimate myth – the "civilizing hero" around whom Naples narrates itself. He made the impossible seem possible: a southern underdog could win, a poor boy could become king, a divided people could unite in joy. That encapsulates the heart of mythology and sacred experience: the hope of transcending reality's limits (even if only for the duration of a match). Maradona gave Naples that spark of transcendence, transforming from man to symbol, from player to guardian deity. In embracing him, Neapolitans rediscovered an imaginative, unified community. As one fan jubilantly said on the night of the 2023 title win: *"Tonight Naples is in paradise... and Maradona is our Saint Peter who opened the gates for us."* That quip – blending sacred imagery with affectionate humor – perfectly captures the Neapolitan spirit and seals the immortality of this myth.

References

- Caillois, R. (2001). *L'uomo e il sacro*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1939).
- Castoriadis, C. (1995). *L'istituzione immaginaria della società*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1975).
- Durand, G. (2013). *Le strutture antropologiche dell'immaginario*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1960).
- Eliade, M. (1976). *Il sacro e il profano*. Milano: Jaca Book. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1957).
- Maffesoli, M. (2022). *La nostalgia del sacro. Il ritorno della religione nelle società postmoderne*. Roma: Armando Editore.
- Morin, E. (2002). *L'uomo e la morte*. Roma: Meltemi. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1951).
- NapoliToday. (2023, June 8). *Napoli e il mito di Maradona, Niola: "I suoi gol, come i miracoli di San Gennaro, ricostruiscono l'identità della città."* Retrieved from <https://www.napolitoday.it/cultura/napoli-nascita-mito-maradona-lezione-niola.html> (Accessed June 29, 2025).
- Ries, J. (2008). *Le costanti del sacro: mito e rito*. Milano: Jaca Book.
- Secondulfo, D. (2019). *Le vie sociali dell'immaginario. Per una sociologia del profondo*. Milano: Mimesis.