

The Festival of Saint Devota: Tradition, Identity and Modernity in Monaco

ANASTASIA V. SHEVCHENKO

Associate Researcher

Laboratoire d'Anthropologie et de Psychologie Cliniques,
Cognitives et Sociales (LAPCOS), Université Côte d'Azur

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7019-075X>

avchevtchenko@gmail.com

Abstract: This ethnographic study explores the transformation and cultural significance of Monaco's Saint Devota festival over 150 years, using historical document analysis, participant observation and qualitative interviews. Variations in the festival's portrayal in the *Journal de Monaco* reflect changing princely interests and societal evolutions, with Prince Louis II playing a key role in reviving the celebration. The ritual of burning the boat and Louis Notari's poetic legend have been crucial in maintaining and institutionalizing the tradition.

Findings confirm that the nail-searching ritual, symbolizing personal faith and collective identity, is central to the festival. However, recent security measures limiting access to this ritual pose challenges to its traditional and educational roles, potentially weakening its impact on national identity construction.

Interviews with Monegasques highlight the festival's significance in cultural heritage appreciation, connection to Monaco and identity formation. Despite modernization challenges, the festival remains a cornerstone of Monegasque culture, fostering a sense of belonging. The public ritual of nail-searching has evolved into a personal practice, strengthening attachment to the tradition and ensuring cultural continuity.

Keywords: Saint Devota, cultural identity, religious festival, sense of belonging, territorial valorization

INTRODUCTION

Saint Devota, the patron saint of Monaco, is celebrated annually over two days, on January 26th and 27th. This festival is deeply rooted in Monaco's cultural and religious traditions, commemorating the arrival of Saint Devota's relics to Monaco and her role in the principality's Christian heritage.

Saint Devota, a Christian from Corsica, was martyred around 303 or 304 AD; her body was secreted away by devotees and *placed on a boat* that miraculously reached Monaco.

According to legend, 700 years later, Monegasques thwarted thieves trying to steal her relics by *setting their boat on fire*, a practice now reenacted annually during the celebration.

The celebration begins with a traditional Mass in Monegasque and culminates in the burning of the boat on the evening of January 26th, followed by a Pontifical Mass and a ceremonial procession on January 27th that blesses the city and the sea.

The ritual origins have been examined academically. Fernand Benoit suggested in 1935 that these might derive from ancient pagan rites, similarly to other European traditions involving boats or doves (Benoit 1935). This view was challenged in 1941 by an article in Monaco's *Official Journal*, which argued the boat burning was not documented before 1841 (Journal de Monaco 1941).

Claude Passet critically examined various historical accounts of Saint Devota in the "*Annales monégasques*" (Passet 1977). His research, based on an unpublished manuscript from the 12th century found in the National Library of France, provides insights into the early narratives surrounding the saint. His comprehensive 2005 book extensively discusses the evolution of Saint Devota's cult (Passet 2005).

Christian Charlet's 2003 study on the saint's depiction on Monaco's 1640 currency highlights how her image was used to reinforce her cult (Charlet 2003). An archaeological analysis by Elena Rossoni-Notter and Émilie Perez provides further understanding of the saint's relics (Diocèse de Monaco TV 2022).

These scholarly efforts – historical, numismatic, literary and archaeological – provide a broad perspective on Saint Devota's significance in Monaco, fostering an anthropological exploration of communal engagement with this tradition, its symbolic meanings and the motivations behind the rituals.

This case also opens broader questions that speak to the theme of crises and uncertainties. How does the festival reveal the difficulties faced by a traditional local community when confronted with modernity and security constraints? Conversely, does the festival act as a means of restoring an idealised vision of community cohesion? These questions guide our analysis and are addressed through the ethnographic material presented below.

In 2023, we conducted an ethnographic research study focusing on the celebrations of Saint Devota in Monaco, from which we developed three principal hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis suggested that the celebration, originally rooted in religious tradition, has incorporated a dimension of cultural heritage, altering its public perception and significance. This transition parallels insights from Laurent Fournier's analysis (Fournier 2004) on the valorization of heritage in Provençal festivals, which highlights how heritage acts as a "cultural treasure", enhancing regional identities by preserving traditions and encouraging new expressions.

According to Durkheim (2011), the significance of collective rituals lies in their ability to unite individuals in a shared experience, reinforcing a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself, "*savoring the idea of eternity*" (Warner 1941). Thus, our second hypothesis considers the transformation of the boat-burning ceremony from a secular collective ritual into a personal act of faith, enhancing its significance for individual participants. This public ritual influences communal belonging through both the collective search for a lucky nail and the personal ritual of preserving it.

Lastly, we propose that the creative decision to burn the boat has positively influenced the development of national identity and a sense of community belonging, which could ensure the tradition's continuity.

Our research question probes whether the ritual's importance to Monegasque identity might be more discursive, serving as a metaphor rather than a concrete reality.

To test these hypotheses and address our research question, we undertook participatory observations during the two-day festivities. This method allowed us to develop initial hypotheses that informed our subsequent research methodology. We analyzed a corpus of 146 years of articles from the *Journal de Monaco*, starting from its first issue in 1858. We specifically reviewed editions following the celebration dates of January 26 and 27 each year. This comprehensive analysis involved noting key themes, recurrent narratives and notable variations across different periods. Our methodology also included qualitative interviews with over 50 participants, which helped confront the Monegasques with their perceptions of the rituals. By synthesizing our results, we have deepened our understanding of the celebration's role within Monegasque society and its evolving significance across different eras.

Magical Rituals and Exclusive Participation

On the morning of January 26, 2023, the Church of Saint Devota held the "Messe des Traditions" at 10:30 AM, delivered in the Monegasque language and orchestrated by the Committee of Monegasque Traditions. At the beginning of the service, the chapel was 90% occupied. The officiant emphasized Saint Devota's role as Monaco's patron saint in his sermon, stating, "Saint

Devota was chosen as patroness when Saint Nicholas was the patron of fishermen. God gave Devota to Monaco.” Post-ceremony, there was noticeable social engagement among attendees, who formed small discussion groups on the church forecourt, predominantly with an average age of around 65.

The morning mass was publicly accessible, yet parts of the evening events seemed to be more controlled. In preparation, we submitted multiple requests for an invitation for these segments, which were declined. This underscores the methodological challenges, the boundaries encountered and the limitations during this ethnographic research.

At 6:30 PM, at Port Hercule along the Route de la Piscine, the evening’s festival began with a procession starting from the Prince’s Car Collection Museum. By 6:40 PM, the boat arrived at Quai Jarland – Vallon des Gaumates where the relics were blessed. The procession continued to Saint Devota Square. At 7:00 PM, a blessing of the Most Holy Sacrament took place at Saint Devota Church, presided over by His Excellency Archbishop Dominique-Marie David of Monaco and Monsignor Guillaume Paris.

Access restrictions prevented direct observation of the atmosphere and emotions during the procession, affecting the depth of empirical data. Recognizing the impossibility of following the procession with Monegasques directly involved in the process, we opted to observe the events broadcast live on a liquid crystal display screen located near the chapel, albeit without sound.

Saint Devota Square was arranged to allow a wide corridor for the procession, with space for spectators occupying about a third of the square. This area was primarily occupied by residents of the Principality, among whom conversations in English, Italian and French could be heard. We also observed a mixed group of young adults who identified themselves as Monegasques.

The evening events were structured in precise sequences, including the arrival of the relics, the release of a dove, the blessing of the relics, salutes of artillery, and the movement of the procession towards the church. Upon the procession’s arrival at the church, they were greeted by members of the penitent brotherhood and sisters. A group of invited individuals, who were not part of the procession, were already gathered inside.

The procession passed by a group behind barriers (which included us), composed of people filming the event on their phones, as seen in Figure 1, before entering the church with the relics. Subsequently, Her Serene Highness Princess Charlene arrived with Their Highnesses Princess Gabriella and Prince Jacques. They entered the chapel to commence the service.

This sequence of events shows the highly organized and ritualized nature of the feast, as well as the participation of various groups of participants and spectators. The event location was divided into two sections by a barrier. A distinction was observed between spectators and actors, illustrating specific challenges related to security and the management of people flows.



Figure 1. A group of spectators behind barriers, many filming the procession with their phones. The event is taking place in front of Saint Devota Church, with a large screen displaying a close-up of the proceedings. Children on shoulders and a crowd gathered to witness the event are visible.

Photograph by Anastasia V. Shevchenko.

At 7:45 PM, Quai Albert Ier became the focal point for the ceremonial burning of the symbolic boat by the princely family. Following the service, in a protocol order starting with the ecclesiastics, followed by the Princess with her children, and finally the guests from the first to the last row, the attendees exited the church and crossed the street, heading towards the port where the boat burning was to take place. For those who observed the first part of the ceremony behind a barrier, at a distance, a space behind the fence had been provided.

To access the boat burning site, those who had attended the first part as distant spectators followed the path by which they had entered. The police released people in groups. They had to cross Boulevard Albert Ier to approach the boat-burning site on Quai Albert Ier. Meanwhile, when no more than 10% of people remained near the chapel in Saint Devota Square (including us), the fence opened, and they were allowed to cross the roundabout directly towards the place where the boat burning was being prepared. From a certain moment, a large part of the flow that initially followed the proposed route found itself blocked on the other side of Boulevard Albert Ier. They were refused passage

across the road and access to the ritual site with the explanation that the event was planned for 600 people and that the quota had been reached.

Having already reached the boat-burning site, we tried to position ourselves at the roadside to get a good view, but the police insisted that everyone stay behind the fence. The Princess, with the hereditary Prince and Princess, lit the fire, and the boat was set ablaze as seen in Figure 2. As it burned, a light show using drones that narrated the story of Saint Devota was presented to the spectators. Once the boat had finished burning, the Princess and her children left the celebration. Firefighters then intervened and began to extinguish the embers. The children of the actors with invitations and the children without such, prepared to search for remaining nails from the boat in the ashes.

The first to rush were the children who were positioned without barriers and who attended the ceremony as invited participants. The children who were among the observers desperately wanted to jump over the barrier and the fence, but their parents held them back, assuring them that “they should open it for us”. That never happened. The children were not deterred and began to infiltrate the corner where there was a gap of 30 to 50 centimeters between the fence and the barrier. The adults immediately followed them.



Figure 2. This image captures the ceremonial burning of a boat. Princess Charlene, along with the hereditary Prince and Princess, are seen igniting the fire. The boat is ablaze.

Photograph by Anastasia V. Shevchenko.



Figure 3. Children and adults are digging through the ashes of the burned boat. The participants are actively searching for lucky nails.

Photograph by Anastasia V. Shevchenko.

Thus began the entertainment part of the evening. The children enjoyed digging through the ashes, the clay (the boat had been placed on a clay podium, which had been eroded by the water used by the firefighters), and the remains of oak and laurel branches. The adults encouraged them, and some participated in the process themselves, as seen in Figure 3.

The celebration ended, leaving behind a suddenly quieter atmosphere. As the evening progressed, the square began to empty, with the last groups of people slowly leaving the area. In the end, only the ashes of the boat and a few persistent children still searching for the precious nails remained.

Religious Observation and Territorial Valorization

On Friday, January 27, 2023, an event occurred that was not announced in the official program available on the government's website. At the entrance of the chapel, it was indicated that the relics would be transported in procession from Saint Devota Chapel to the Cathedral, where they were to be received. At 9:10 AM, approximately twenty parishioners and faithful gathered at the Chapel. The priest recited a prayer, blessed the assembled crowd, and led them towards the Rocher. With January 27 being a public holiday in Monaco, the streets were quiet.

Along the way, the priest blessed the police department building, the Principality as viewed from the Rocher, as seen in Figure 4, and the princely palace. Upon arrival at the Cathedral, penitents and representatives from the Order of Saint Lazarus, the Order of Barry and the Order of the Marine were already aligned.

Those who had come for the service were already inside the Cathedral. At the start, the Cathedral was about 80% full, rising to approximately 98% capacity as the service commenced. After the service concluded, the procession exited in a protocolar order and headed towards the Palace.

At 11:15 AM, a solemn procession of the relics took place, attended by several members of the clergy, the Cathedral Choir, the penitents of the Venerable Archconfraternity of Mercy, as well as delegations from the Municipal Council of Lucciana and the Municipal Band.

The route began on the forecourt of the Cathedral, proceeded along Rue Colonel Bellando de Castro, through Palace Square, where the Sovereign House was blessed, and along the Ramparts, where the City received its blessing. The procession then returned to the Cathedral via Rue Colonel Bellando de Castro, where a blessing of the Sea took place on the Cathedral's forecourt as seen in Figure 5.



Figure 4. A priest is holding a relic and blessing the city from the Rocher, with a scenic view of the Monaco harbor in the background.

Photograph by Anastasia V. Shevchenko.



Figure 5. This image features a large gathering on the steps of a cathedral. The scene includes clergy in red robes, nuns, and other participants lined up and watching the blessing on the cathedral's forecourt.

Photograph by Anastasia V. Shevchenko.

From the palace window, the Prince and his family watched the procession. Two days before the festival, the Prince had tested positive for Covid-19 for the third time and thus wore an FFP3 mask. Accompanied by an orchestra, the procession moved with solemnity, and a sense of unity was palpable, thanks to efforts by a protocol service member working in the Cathedral who encouraged people to gather around the relics, to approach without hesitation.

Tourists took photos and seemed pleased with what they witnessed. Some quietly joined the procession. There were no barriers to participation for those who wished to join. After returning to the Cathedral and placing the relics inside, the priest thanked all attendees, congratulated them on the festival, and wished for the assistance of the patron saint. The gathered crowd burst into applause. Despite the low temperature in Monaco, at 8°C, people seemed happy to stay longer and socialize.

Symbolic Dualism and Ritual Complexity

Field observations reveal that the festival maintains the tradition of distinguishing between the sacred and the profane, thereby reinforcing this dualism.

Symbolic divisions are apparent: the first day ends with a secular celebration, mainly involving locals engaged in traditional activities, while the second day features religious festivities that overlay a spiritual dimension onto the urban landscape, allowing broad participation yet preserving a sense of intimacy.

The interplay of symbolism is noteworthy. At dusk, when the fire is lit, a contrast dance of shadows and lights begins. The representation of the four elements – fire (the boat’s flame), water (the boat’s arrival), air (the dove flying skyward), and earth (the ashes from which children eagerly gather nails) – enhances the ritual’s thematic richness, emphasizing its deep cultural and spiritual significance.

Through participatory observation on January 26, we noted the participants’ enthusiasm and eagerness, particularly during the nail-searching ritual. According to Durkheim, the festival is defined by two fundamental elements: the ceremonial and the entertainment aspects. The shift from the solemnity of the mass to the energetic search for nails by children encapsulates the spirit of the Saint Devota festival.

After participating in the ritual and noting a reluctance to allow non-participants to observe the nail collection, we consulted an active participant about potential new regulations. We inquired about the quantity of nails placed in the boat, to which a former municipal representative responded that he previously included a considerable amount, though the current quantity is reduced. He noted,

Even if there are fewer nails now, it’s not too significant, unfortunately, because people are no longer allowed to approach the site. Previously, as soon as the fire died down, people would gather nails; now, for safety reasons, this is prohibited.

He distinguished between genuine and imitation nails, explaining, “The real ones are slightly bent and copper-colored, while the fake ones look new and straight. These are not just relics; they are considered lucky.” He also shared that he carries a nail in his wallet, a sentiment echoed by multiple other participants in interviews who also keep a nail for protection.

Anthropological examination must confront a peculiar aspect of the Saint Devota celebration: specifically, which boat do the Monegasques burn? According to local legend, there are two narratives involving two different boats – one that carried the Saint herself, and the other associated with the theft of her relics. The ritual burning typically features a boat painted in Monaco’s national colors of red and white, which ostensibly represents the thieves’ vessel. This presents a semiotic contradiction: how can the boat, symbolically adorned with national colors, represent something nefarious?

We propose that the ritual symbolically merges the burning of both boats. This interpretation allows for the coexistence of both narratives within the same symbolic act. The ritual of burning, a tradition of regeneration noted

by Fernand Benoit in his studies of Mediterranean fishermen, symbolizes the destruction of the old to rejuvenate anew. Thus, even though the boat bears national colors, its burning does not celebrate the theft but rather the community's overcoming of past adversities. The painted colors likely serve to embed the ritual deeper within the national psyche, aligning a narrative of theft and redemption with the principality's identity. This dual representation within a single ritual act reflects the complex layering of history, mythology and national pride. It is noteworthy that at the initiation of this tradition in 1880, two boats were set aflame: "According to custom, after the liturgical prayers recited in the presence of a large crowd of the faithful, two boats were burned at Saint Devota Square, in front of the sanctuary" (Journal de Monaco 1880).

Ritual Establishment and Local Engagement

The comprehensive analysis of articles published in the *Journal de Monaco* reveals a significant evolution of the rituals and symbols associated with the celebration of Saint Devota over time.

During the first ten years under the reign of Charles III (20 June 1856 – 10 September 1889), there is a gradual evolution in creative research and the establishment of a ritual. Initially, the event was viewed as just another part of Monaco's entertainment calendar, highlighting its charm, elegance and grace. "We are not lacking in events this week. Three days of celebration, a ball, a concert, a dramatic evening; [...] finally, the touching spectacle of a religious ceremony" (Journal de Monaco 1860). However, the articles also emphasized the local dimension of the celebration. "All these boats were decorated with the national colors, as were the buildings stationed in the harbor" (Journal de Monaco 1862).

Over the years, there has been an increase in the participation of the princely family, thus enhancing the significance of the festival and giving it an official dimension. Bonfires lit on the eve of the festival are mentioned repeatedly.

In the second decade of Charles III's reign, creative elements such as the burning of the boat were introduced. "[...] a huge bonfire in which the legendary boat burned had attracted a large crowd" (Journal de Monaco 1875). Articles began to cater more towards the local public, thus emphasizing the national aspect of the celebration. "Along the avenue leading to the sanctuary, masts topped with banners in the colors of our Princes and bearing their coats of arms as well as their religious motto: Deo Juvante" (Journal de Monaco 1877).

In the third decade of Charles III's reign, the articles aimed to inform and raise awareness among the population about the importance of the celebration. The news provided detailed information on the proceedings of the celebrations, the personalities present and the elements such as the burning of a boat or a bonfire.

In summary, during the reign of Charles III, an evolution in the ritual of the celebration is observed, a constant search for an ideal ritual scenario, with variations in traditional elements such as the burning of the boat or a bonfire.

Shift in Priorities and Decline of Coverage

During the reign of Albert I (10 September 1889 – 26 June 1922), the press devoted significant attention to the Prince's scientific activities, highlighting his passion for science and maritime exploration. Reports on the Prince's research in the polar seas and his presentations to the Academy of Sciences were often given precedence.

The portrayal of Saint Devota's celebration varied annually. Some years provided detailed reports, outlining the sequence of events, notable attendees, and protocol aspects. In other instances, the news was succinct, relegated to a secondary position:

The feast of Saint Devota was celebrated on Tuesday evening and Wednesday, with the usual solemnity. On the 27th, Monsignor Theuret officiated pontifically at the Cathedral. The afternoon procession was led by Monsignor Chapon, bishop of Nice. Cool, yet fair weather favored these various ceremonies (de Lorraine 1897).

Specific details of the celebration, such as the burning of the boat, were less frequently mentioned, creating some uncertainty regarding their consistent observance.

There was also a tendency to incorporate the celebration of Saint Devota into other high-profile events. Reports often referenced concurrent activities such as automobile races, international exhibitions and artistic events.

During the second decade of Albert I's reign, a continued reduction in the amount of space dedicated to the celebration in the newspaper was observed. In terms of language, there was a gradual increase in the complexity of the journal's style during this period. "[...] the feast of Sainte Dévote, [...] began on Tuesday with the auto-da-fé of the boat in front of the parish church [...]" (Journal de Monaco 1909). Longer and more complex sentences were utilized.

Finally, from 1918 onwards, official news and activities of the Sovereign House began to occupy more space in the journal, pushing the news of the Patron saint's celebration into the background. In the last three years, the celebration was not mentioned at all.

Revival of Tradition and Identity Promotion

From the very beginning of the reign of Louis II (26 June 1922 – 9 May 1949), in 1923, the Prince sought to "*revive a very ancient custom*" (Journal de Monaco 1923) by personally participating in the traditional burning of the boat. This marked the beginning of a new phase in the promotion of the event.

In the early years, there was a growing focus on the celebration, with detailed articles describing the events attended by the Prince and his family. Articles became more extensive, detailed, and consistently listed all the important figures present at the ceremony. The descriptions became more precise, with fre-

quent mentions of the Monegasque Anthem and processions, “The ringing of bells and the performance of the Monegasque Anthem by the Municipal Music announced the arrival of the Princes [...]” (Journal de Monaco 1927).

In 1928, a trend was cemented with the publication of an article on “*A Monegasque Poem*” written in the Monegasque dialect by Louis Notari. The work was dedicated to Prince Louis II, who thus showed his support for this initiative (Journal de Monaco 1928).

In the following years, the celebration of Saint Devota continued to be mentioned in the journal, albeit in a more standardized and less detailed manner. The articles adopted a more formal, bureaucratic and protocol-oriented tone, with increased attention paid to the official personalities present, emphasizing the festivity and its events but without providing as much detail as before. The information was primarily aimed at the local population, placing more emphasis on the personalities present and the official protocols.

A notable trend was the introduction of new attractions and visual elements in the festivities. For example, the appearance of a dove during the 1937 celebrations:

Between the jetties, a symbolic boat with a dove at the prow made its appearance under a dome of fire and escorted by numerous boats adorned with Venetian lanterns, crossed the harbor accompanied by the light of a spotlight (Journal de Monaco 1937).

In the time of WWII for three years, there is no mention of the feast, but since 1946, the celebrations have continued anew.

In conclusion, under the reign of Louis II, the tradition was faithfully maintained. The publication of a poem in the Monegasque dialect institutionalized the tradition and demonstrated the importance given to promoting tradition and Monegasque identity.

Institutional Recognition and Social Emphasis

During the reign of Rainier III (9 May 1949 – 6 April 2005), the celebration maintained the significance of the religious traditions of Monaco. Yearly festivities were conducted with splendor:

On the occasion of Saint Devota, artistic events were organized, among them at the Salle des Variétés, a concert performed by La Paladienne and a recorded audition of ‘Sur un beau lys du sang’ text by Monsieur l’abbé Henri Baudoin, music by Marc-César Scotto, featuring the National Orchestra and the Choirs of the Monte-Carlo Opera and the Studio of Monaco (Journal de Monaco 1955).

The participation of ecclesiastical dignitaries underscored the religious significance of the event. The Feast was regarded as a momentous occasion, and its

religious dimension was further highlighted by the constitutional recognition of Catholicism as the state religion of Monaco in 1962.

The consistent presence of the princely family was a recurring element of the celebrations, thus reinforcing the event's significance and official status. However, in some years, such as 1956, the Prince did not participate in the event, which could influence how news was presented.

Coverage of the event was often published in two different sections of the *Journal de Monaco* (*Maison Souverain* and *Information Diverses*), and descriptions of the festivities would overlap and mutually reinforce, thus emphasizing the event's importance.

It was H.S.H. the Prince who, after the Salute, lit the pyre on which a boat painted in the Monegasque colors had been placed. Thus, the old tradition of burning was renewed. And it was with a very beautiful fireworks display from the jetties of the Port that this first day was to end (Journal de Monaco 1966).

From 1972 onwards, mentions of the festivities primarily focused on luncheons at the princely palace, suggesting a shift in how news was presented. Descriptions of the celebrations became less detailed and may be considered more as social news than news about religious festivals.

On January 27, the day of the celebration of the Feast of Saint Devota, Their Serene Highnesses the Prince and Princess, accompanied by H.S.H. Prince Albert, hosted a luncheon at the princely palace. Attending this luncheon were [...] (Journal de Monaco 1975).

From 1997 onwards, mentions of the Feast of Saint Devota celebrations disappeared from the social news of the Official Journal, indicating a change in editorial direction.

Perseverance and Stability of Ritual Practices

During the reign of S.A.S. Prince Albert II, the execution of the ritual of burning the boat was never questioned, and the boat was burned each year. Even in 2021, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the traditional ritual was maintained, albeit without public attendance.

However, the search for new solutions and formats continued to evolve. During the reign of Prince Rainier III, members of the Marine service were responsible for transporting the relics on foot from the chapel to the cathedral. This practice was later modified; it was decided to transport the relics by car. In 2013, a new parish priest at Saint Devota chapel expressed a desire to return to the old practice of carrying the relics on foot. To avoid security issues, this was presented as a “walk with the relics”, requiring some police oversight. This

modification restored part of the historical tradition, illustrating a commitment to maintaining a connection with the past.

An innovation was the introduction of drones in 2020 to replace traditional fireworks, largely due to environmental concerns of Prince Albert II. However, by 2023, Monaco returned to the traditional salute of honor.

A current issue for organizers is sourcing boats for burning. Historically, these boats, often in disrepair, were sourced locally, managed by the Marine service, and stored in a type of “boat pound”. However, implementing this method has become increasingly challenging. One major difficulty is finding suitable boats without compromising maritime heritage. Additionally, many boats that appear wooden are actually lined with plastic, rendering them unsuitable for burning. If this scarcity continues, using props might become necessary, a solution considered regrettable by those involved. The search for suitable boats is an ongoing effort, particularly focused on Italy and Corsica. Once located, these boats are stored in a dry place for at least a year to ensure they are properly dried before use.

Comparative analysis reveals a mix of transformation and permanence. It is observed that variations in how the celebration was treated in the *Journal de Monaco* are linked to different reigns. These variations reflect the changing interests of the princes and societal evolutions of the time, allowing us to conclude that the tradition has managed to maintain and transmit itself across generations, partly due to Prince Louis II’s interest, who aimed to revive the patron saint’s celebration from his first year of reign. Louis Notari’s text played a role in institutionalizing this tradition.

This documentary study partially confirms our third hypothesis. The introduction and establishment of the secular aspect, represented by the burning of the boat, indeed had an impact on the vitality of the tradition. An ideal scenario was sought and established, and continues over time, but the princely political will remained predominant. Without Prince Louis II’s decision to strengthen national identity and the sense of belonging, it is difficult to assert with certainty that the tradition would have endured.

The Heritage Transformation: The Contribution of Literary Representation

In the article “*De Santa Devota a Barma Grande*” (Bon 2019), Dominique Bon explores the decision of Monaco’s Local Tradition Committee in 1927 to commission Louis Notari to create a grammar and lexicon for the Monegasque language. Notari, emphasizing the need for pre-existing literature for language preservation, composed a poetic legend honoring Saint Devota, before undertaking his commission. This work was completed within two months from the initial commission.

Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012), discusses how many traditions were “actively constructed”, especially in the context of the 19th and early 20th centuries amid rapid social and economic

changes due to industrialization, urbanization and the formation of nation-states in Europe. These factors created a need for social cohesion and identity, prompting the creation or reinvention of traditions to unite societies and provide a sense of continuity with a reimagined past.

Using historical context reconstruction, it is evident that during the 1870s, Monaco was undergoing its first economic boom, marked by burgeoning international allure. Concurrently, significant urban development, particularly in the Condamine district, directly impacted local life. In such a scenario, a demand to reinforce local heritage likely emerged, spurred by the need to maintain a connection to one's territory as it underwent transformations by incoming populations.

These processes are conceptualized in the works of intellectuals of the time. In the text by Louis Notari, we read: "We, the people of this country, are like dispersed amidst strangers of all kinds, who often treat us with contempt because we are modest and very far from this noisy world that is fashionable" (Notari 1927).

In *The Sociology of Critical Capacity* (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999), the authors examine how individuals manage to analyze situations and come to an understanding during "critical moments". They assert that this is possible when the criteria for justification coincide. In *La Légende de Sainte Dévote*, Louis Notari explains to the Monegasques the normality and fatalism of accepting new realities of life, thereby justifying their *adherence to this social contract* through their own values and the possibility of maintaining a "natural order" of things through respect for tradition.

Examining certain ideological markers intended to preserve the memory of events for subsequent transmission to future generations, *La Légende de Sainte Dévote* is an educational poem that deeply anchors the understanding of Monaco's cultural identity in the minds of its inhabitants. It addresses the progress of community life, social changes, spirituality that unites the community, the strong tradition of independence, the preference for peace over war, divine protection, faith, the importance of traditions, the preservation of cultural heritage, the importance of collective memory and the transmission of traditions. References to religion, culture and the history of ancestors are present throughout the text, testifying to the Monegasques' attachment to their roots and beliefs. The lyrical and poetic style highlights the beauty and mystery of the events described and invites the reader to ponder the profound meaning of these experiences.

Thus, the first hypothesis, which suggests that the celebration has transformed into a heritage dimension, thus altering its perception, is confirmed by the analysis of Louis Notari's text. Sociocultural changes have significantly influenced the embodiment of tradition, leading to the addition of heritage valorization and subsequently altering the celebration's perception. Since then, the fervent celebration has become a commitment to past generations, a promise to preserve tradition for future generations.

The Role of Individual Faith

Our research is aimed at confirming or challenging the second hypothesis, which posits that the ritual of individual faith plays a significant role in the vitality of the tradition. Despite extensive studies and numerous descriptions of the festival, the ritual of seeking lucky nails seems to be overlooked in the literature, dismissed as an insignificant adjunct to the tradition. We argue, however, that this public ritual significantly influences the sense of belonging through the collective ritual of searching for a lucky nail and the individual ritual of its subsequent preservation.

To understand the impact of the patron saint's celebrations on the construction of identity, we conducted over 50 qualitative interviews with Monegasques. The following section of this article presents an analysis of trends based on selected interviews that synthesize responses from various participants.

A prominent trend is *the appreciation of cultural heritage*. An interviewee, despite not adhering to religious practices, compares the Saint Devota celebration to Saint-Nicolas in Belgium, highlighting its significance as a cultural heritage event rather than a religious one. She states, "For me, it's similar to Saint-Nicolas for the Belgians, a part of our heritage." She has introduced her children to the festivities, particularly appreciating *the proximity to the princely family*. She emphasizes the children's enthusiasm for the nighttime event, especially the boat burning and nail searching, describing it as "quite something". According to her, these traditions instill a profound sense of *pride and uniqueness*, comparable to receiving gifts from the Prince or Princess at the palace during Christmas (Monegasque tradition), thereby reinforcing cultural identity from a young age.

Another notable trend is *the connection to Monaco*. The interviewee stresses the importance of teaching local traditions to children. She recalls moments of confusion among her children about different local celebrations but sees these as teaching opportunities. She recounts bringing her children to the Saint Devota ceremony to collect nails, a practice she believes every resident should experience, noting the beauty of the procession and the Corsican chants, despite the potential cold. This involvement, she argues, is crucial for strengthening the individual's connection to Monaco and underscores the celebration's cultural significance.

A Monegasque man, aged over 60, views the celebration as important for *cultural education* but not essential for repeated annual participation. He regards the celebration as a *rite of passage that introduces young Monegasques to an important tradition*, forming part of their cultural identity. Instantly, he shares a personal memory of accidentally burning his fingers while collecting a nail from the burning boat, a vivid memory that endures through the years. This memory acts like Proust's madeleine, triggering a cascade of reminiscences, reinforcing his cultural belonging.

Another interviewee describes the Saint Devota celebration as a “symptom of Monegasque society”, reflecting how Monegasque identity is preserved and transmitted, often under constraint. The celebration is seen as inseparable from Monegasque identity: “St. Devota and the Rock, nothing can be done about it. It’s the identity.” The participant highlights that despite its symbolic importance, active participation in the festival is not necessarily a priority for all Monegasque families, including his own. He notes a shift in the festival’s atmosphere over time, drawing those who wish to demonstrate their closeness to tradition. He describes Saint Devota as becoming increasingly procedural, with a scramble for places due to the inevitable presence of the princely family. He criticizes those who attend mainly to be photographed with the Prince, suggesting a divide between those who participate in the festival for cultural reasons and those more interested in public image and prestige.

One observed trend is *the examination of modernization’s impact*. An interviewee offers a nostalgic perspective on Saint Devota, expressing concern about modern changes that “affect the authenticity”. She laments the evolution of rituals, particularly the ritual of searching for nails: “It’s just my opinion, but I think modern reality spoils this festival.” She is disappointed by firefighters extinguishing the fire immediately after the ceremony, and new barriers depriving participants of the chance to search for nails. She refers to the “magic” of the celebration, an element she believes has been lost due to modern changes. For her, maintaining the traditional ritual is crucial for preserving the cultural and spiritual significance of Saint Devota.

One more participant recalls a time when the celebration was much more intimate and family-oriented, with the princely family and the Monaco community participating together in the ceremony. He remembers a time when there was less security and fewer protocols, allowing participants to be closer to each other. According to the interviewee, this closeness reinforced *the sense of belonging to a larger family*. The annual Saint Devota celebration was an opportunity for this “family” to gather and share a moment of spiritual and cultural communion.

Many respondents mention *a personal commitment to tradition*. An interviewee tells the story of the boat that delivers the relics to the port, built in 1956 in Cannes for Princess Grace’s arrival in Monaco. This small pilot boat was used to assist with the maneuvering of the Prince Rainier’s boat, the *Déa Juvante*, as it entered the port with the future Princess Grace on board. After this historical event, the boat continued to serve Monaco’s Maritime Service. The interviewee and two friends purchased this boat when it was sold. Unfortunately, one of the three friends died from COVID-19, but the interviewee and his remaining friend, with assistance from the Yacht Club, continue to maintain the boat and make it available for the annual celebration of Saint Devota.

The same interviewee shares another facet of his personal connection to the tradition. In the 1980s, while working for the Maritime Service, he was tasked

with transporting the relics of Saint Devota, a role he took over from his retired predecessor. Since then, he continues to perform this duty each year, demonstrating his personal commitment to this tradition. This anecdote illustrates how the tradition is maintained and strengthened by the personal efforts of those attached to Monaco and its heritage. The boat, having played a role in a significant moment in Monaco's history, continues to serve the community by participating in the feast each year.

We also observe mentions of *invisible cultural bonds*. One participant highlights the significant role of the Saint Devota cult in the cultural and social fabric of Monaco. Even for those who are not necessarily practicing or regular churchgoers, Saint Devota represents an invisible link that unites Monegasques. The interviewee shares personal experiences with his three children, each of whom has a different relationship with religion and the cult of the patron saint. He expresses some frustration regarding his third child, who does not attend mass. However, he acknowledges that "even she", despite her apparent disengagement from religious practice, "would speak passionately about Saint Devota if asked". This illustrates the idea that, although active participation may vary, the cult of Saint Devota is deeply rooted in Monegasque cultural identity.

Symbolism and personal rituals are also noted. A participant refers to his own tattoo of Saint Devota on his arm, an indelible representation of his personal devotion. His choice of this tattoo reflects his belief that his connection with Saint Devota is permanent and unchangeable, unlike other personal relationships that may evolve or change over time. Another aspect of devotion to the Saint mentioned in the interview concerns the carrying of nails. The participant himself carries two, one on his person and another kept in his scooter. These nails seem to have a protective or talismanic significance, especially in connection with potentially dangerous activities like riding a motorcycle. "And it's true that when someone here needs a bit of spirituality, you easily turn to Saint Devota."

There is also mention of *faith and divine protection*. During a conversation with a real estate developer in Monaco, he told us the story of an accident on the construction site. "Thank God it was at night and no one was hurt," our interlocutor said, and he thanked Saint Devota several times and made the sign of the cross several times.

Thus, we have an answer to the question: "Could devotion to the tradition be more of a metaphor, a public discourse, than reality?" The answer is: it is neither a metaphor nor a discourse, but a genuine feeling of belonging. And this feeling is instilled from childhood. Parents, having themselves participated in the ritual during their youth, feel a duty to bring their children to do the same at least once or twice. For them, it's about forming a sense of proximity to the princely family, fostering a sense of kinship, telling the story of the patron saint, and instilling a sense of cultural belonging, cultural identity. The religious aspect of the event often comes after education on the national part.

While the celebration of Saint Devota is deeply rooted in religious traditions, the active participation of the princely family suggests a close connection between religion and the sovereign house. We observe the emergence of an intermingling of politics and religion, an interaction not explicitly highlighted in classical texts of sociology. Indeed, examining the works of Durkheim or the analyses of Mauss, there is a tendency to isolate the religious fact to study its specifics independently. However, our approach limited the perception of interactions between the religious and other spheres of society.

Rediscovering True Wealth: The Symbolic Power of the Saint Devota Nail

The festival of Saint Devota is a cornerstone of Monegasque cultural tradition, instilling a profound sense of identity and belonging among its citizens from an early age. Even those less inclined toward religious observance acknowledge the importance of Saint Devota as a vital component of their cultural heritage. Participation in the festival facilitates a deeper connection to the community, particularly through activities that educate and involve children, reinforcing their cultural ties with the Principality and the princely family.

A notable tension exists between the aspiration to maintain the traditions and the changing dynamics of contemporary society. Some participants criticize adjustments to the festival, made for safety or protocol, while others recognize the necessity of such changes. A sense of nostalgia pervades among some attendees, who mourn the perceived loss of authenticity brought on by modernization.

Our primary finding is that the public ritual of the Saint Devota celebration has evolved to engender a private ritual: carrying nails as personal talismans. This insight supports our third hypothesis that transitioning from a collective to an individual ritual has intensified the attachment to the tradition. Many locals carry a nail with them, believing it offers direct protection from the saint.

The ritual of searching for nails in the charred remnants of the boat remains a vital element of the celebration for several reasons. First, it converts spectators into actors. Second, it sustains intergenerational transmission as parents bring their children. Third, it adds a modest sense of adventure that draws in the young. Fourth, the nails are thought to confer protection or luck, which lends the practice both personal and collective meaning.

However, recent security measures that restrict access to the ritual of nail searching pose a threat to its educational and traditional aspects. The individual retrieval of nails personalizes the experience, enhancing its significance. Alterations to or removal of this ritual could diminish interest and weaken the overall role of the celebration in reinforcing national identity.

The ethnography shows that the celebration of Saint Devota reflects both the crises faced by a traditional community confronted with modernity and the capacity of ritual to restore a sense of cohesion. On the one hand, security measures, new protocols and the difficulty of sourcing boats reveal how

modernization generates uncertainty and weakens certain practices, such as the public search for nails. On the other hand, the festival continues to reproduce an image of the community: the princely family at its center, children participating in the ritual, and individuals carrying nails as private talismans of protection. In this way, the festival both exposes the fragility of tradition in modern conditions and reaffirms its ability to generate continuity and belonging.

In the anthropology of magic, three laws of magic are described (Frazer 1990):

1. The Law of Similarity: Like produces like, or an effect resembles its cause;
2. The Law of Contact or Contagion: Things that have been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance even after physical separation; and
3. The Part Represents the Whole: A part of something can represent or affect the whole.

It is this last principle that is particularly evident in the Monegasque ritual: a nail from the boat symbolizes not only the entire boat (painted in red and white) but, by extension, all of Monaco. The part of the boat (the nail, *symbolically reminiscent of the nails from Christ's cross*) stands for the boat, and the boat itself represents the national symbol, embodying Monaco itself. This creates a recursive metaphor where the boat, as a national symbol, encapsulates Monaco itself.

This sequence reveals that Monaco, often associated with myths of wealth and affluence, may find its true value in a simple rusted nail. This nail, under the laws of magic, becomes a microcosm of the cultural and historical wealth of Monaco, offering a renewed perspective on what constitutes true wealth. Ultimately, it may be in a simple nail that Monaco's greatest riches are found.

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Anastasia V. Shevchenko is Associate Researcher at LAPCOS, Université Côte d'Azur. Her research interests focus on the formation and evolution of identities, and the various senses of belonging within different cultural contexts. She is particularly interested in how individuals and communities navigate cultural changes, maintain cultural heritage and develop new forms of identity and belonging in multicultural environments.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7019-075X>
avchevtchenko@gmail.com