

A Journey Into the Albanian Communities in Italy

Echoes From a Merged Horizon

By

Barbara Gabriella Renzi

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my mother, Maria Elsa Musacchio, and my grandmother, Costantina Musacchio. I am deeply grateful to the FEL for awarding me a scholarship to study the Arbëresh language, and to Eda Dehermi for her invaluable support.

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Preface

This book was born from the depths of my soul, inspired by the community to which I belong by birthright. Through my mother, I am Arbëreshë, and the offspring of an Arbëreshë woman is always, deeply, Arbëreshë. Though I have only partially lived the Arbëreshë way of life, it remains a fundamental part of my identity. In these pages, I reflect on the traditions, culture, and spirit of a people whose roots are deeply embedded within me.

The Arbëreshë are an Albanian-origin community who settled in southern Italy between the 15th and 18th centuries, fleeing the Ottoman invasion of their homeland. Today, the Arbëreshë are primarily found in regions like Calabria, Sicily, Molise, and Puglia, where they have managed to preserve their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity for centuries. Their language, a variant of the ancient Albanian dialect known as Arbëresh, is still spoken in many of these communities, serving as a living link to their ancestral roots. The language has been passed down through generations, despite the pressures of assimilation and the dominance of the Italian language.

In terms of religion, the Arbëreshë were originally Orthodox Christians, and some communities continue to follow the Byzantine Rite, even though they are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This unique religious heritage, coupled with their distinct traditions, has helped them maintain a strong sense of identity. Their villages often feature churches adorned with Byzantine iconography, and religious ceremonies are performed in both Arbëresh and Greek, reflecting their deep connection to Eastern Christianity.

The Arbëreshë community, with its history and enduring heritage, has shaped me in ways that go beyond family ties. It is more than just ancestry—it is a way of life, a connection to ancestors who carried with them their language, customs, and resilience from a homeland left behind centuries ago. This book is my way of honoring that legacy, giving voice to a culture that continues to thrive, even as it evolves over time.

My main focus is to highlight that the Arbëreshë community of Portocannone, like other Arbëreshë communities, came to Italy as refugees, fleeing the advancing Ottoman Empire. These were Orthodox Christian communities, and while some have managed to preserve their religious rites, others have lost them over time. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Arbëreshë people, however, is their ability to maintain their traditions—particularly their language—for hundreds of years. The Arbëreshë language, a variant of Albanian, remains a living testimony to the resilience of these communities, passed down through generations despite the pressures of assimilation. Here, I explore the reasons behind this extraordinary preservation of identity.

Having conducted interviews and traveled through Arbëreshë communities across Italy, I have witnessed the profound sense of nostalgia that permeates these places. One must also acknowledge the historical tensions with their neighbors, often dismissively referred to as Latini. Relations were consistently strained, marked by a lack of mutual respect: the Arbëreshë were seen as violent and savage, while they viewed the Latini as untrustworthy, people whose words and promises held little value. Even as recently as after World War II, approaching Arbëreshë villages at night or entering them could feel like crossing into enemy territory. Many of my interviewees shared stories of legendary brawls. These strained relations, characterized by mutual distrust, defined much of the interaction between the two groups. Despite this, the integration was smooth and complete.

Contrary to common belief, the Arbëreshë have indeed amalgamated into Italian society. Many, including my grandfather, volunteered to fight in wars such as World War II, despite not sharing the goals of those conflicts. This was done out of loyalty and gratitude to the country that had given them refuge. The Italian cultural and political sphere has recognized Arbëreshë contributions, especially through figures like Francesco Crispi, who was a key figure in Italy's unification and served as Prime Minister four times. He shifted from Mazzinian republicanism to monarchism, allied Italy with Germany, and implemented reforms

like abolishing the death penalty. However, his colonial ambitions led to Italy's defeat at Adwa in 1896, ending his political career.

At least in the case of Portocannone and based on the interviews I conducted, it should be noted that integration is different for the younger generations. Many no longer live in rural villages but have moved to cities, sometimes far from their hometowns, or even abroad. Many have also lost their language; they may understand it, but they no longer speak it. For the older generations, however, integration involved a different way of seeing life. They found themselves in a foreign land, which had welcomed them. Despite this hospitality, they often felt they were in hostile territory, surrounded by people they didn't respect and who didn't respect them. The only option was to stay together as a group, helping each other and putting on an external "suit"—like office attire—when dealing with outsiders. They learned the language, but their core identity didn't change.

The situation began to change when women started marrying outside the community, as I discovered from several interviews conducted in Portocannone. Whenever possible, education was pursued, but the community started losing itself when Arbëreshë women began marrying outsiders. This was significant because, according to what was revealed in the interviews, women are the ones who preserve the language and culture.

Minority languages, like Arbëreshë, are valuable repositories of culture, history, and identity. When a language disappears, we lose more than just a means of communication; we lose an entire worldview, along with its traditions, customs, and ways of thinking. Each language has the power to reflect a unique relationship between people and their environment, between communities and their way of life. Today, many minority languages are at risk of extinction, a phenomenon accelerated by factors such as globalization, urbanization, and cultural assimilation. Dominant languages like English, Chinese, and Spanish have become essential tools for modern life, pushing smaller linguistic communities to abandon their native tongues in favor of more widely spoken ones.

This process, though it may seem inevitable, brings significant consequences. The disappearance of a language means the loss of concepts, idioms, and expressions that often have no equivalent in other languages. Oral traditions, cultural practices, and historical memory, passed down through generations, are also lost. Minority languages often hold knowledge specific to their local territories, natural resources, and daily life, knowledge that can prove invaluable. These languages not only connect a community to its past but also play a key role in shaping its present identity. Arbëreshë, spoken by Albanian communities in Italy, such as in Portocannone, is a prime example. This language, with its ancient roots and unique migration history, is at risk of disappearing. Arbëreshë is not just a language but a living testimony of historical migrations, cultural exchanges, and the struggles of a population that has preserved its identity for centuries.

Many other languages also face extinction, each with its own wealth of knowledge and stories. Safeguarding these languages means protecting the cultural pluralism of our world and respecting human diversity. Promoting the preservation of minority languages is a crucial step in keeping alive a rich cultural and historical legacy that, once lost, cannot be regained. The danger is that with each language that vanishes, we drift a little further from the complexity and beauty of our global diversity.

Introduction: The World's Languages

The world's languages are disappearing quickly. About 40% of people don't have access to education in their native languages. This loss is damaging the heritage and wisdom passed down through generations.¹

UNESCO is working hard to preserve and support multilingualism and inclusivity.² It aims to make information accessible and break down barriers to knowledge, and its efforts include adding indigenous languages to school curriculums, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring these languages are passed on to future generations. UNESCO also supports educational policies that incorporate multiple languages into standard learning.

In the late 20th century, inspired by Bangladesh, UNESCO's General Conference established International Mother Language Day to promote cultural and linguistic diversity, tolerance, and respect. Recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, this day celebrates linguistic diversity worldwide and highlights the significance of multilingualism in education and cultural preservation.

UNESCO has also created an Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, which highlights nearly 2,500 languages at risk of disappearing. The atlas underscores the importance of preserving linguistic diversity, provides

¹ "40% Don't Access Education in a Language They Understand," *UNESCO*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/40-dont-access-education-language-they-understand>; Global Education Monitoring Report Team, "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?", Policy Paper 24, February 2016, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713>.

² See, for example, the UNESCO report "Best Practices and Lessons Learned to Preserve, Revitalize, and Promote Indigenous Languages," which outlines the strategies and achievements of the International Year of Indigenous Languages, and the ongoing International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), which provides insights into effective methods for language preservation and revitalization. "Best Practices and Lessons Learned to Preserve, Revitalize and Promote Indigenous Languages," *UNESCO*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/best-practices-and-lessons-learned-preserve-revitalize-and-promote-indigenous-languages>.

detailed information on endangered languages, and is a call to action for policymakers and the public to protect these important languages.

In Italy, national laws protect so-called “historical linguistic minorities,” ensuring the preservation of languages and cultures of groups such as Albanians, Slovenes, Franco-Provençal speakers, and Sardinians. These communities continue to thrive in their ancestral lands, keeping their languages alive as a testament to their enduring cultural heritage.

Italy, along with the rest of the world, is dedicated to protecting linguistic diversity, ensuring every language maintains its place in the rich tapestry of human expression. With this in mind, this book focuses on the Arbëresh language and culture, both of which are disappearing from the Italian landscape. My aim is not to exalt Arbëresh culture but rather to explain the miracle of its preservation over the years. Now that the language is disappearing, so too is the culture. This book, the result of my ethnographic and autoethnographic research, attempts to explain the history of the Arbëresh people and understand how the language was preserved for so long, the relationships between the Arbëresh and Italians, and the miracle of integration.

Methodology

By employing ethnography, I could deeply explore the Arbëreshë culture and community of Portocannone. This qualitative research method, predominantly used in anthropology and other social sciences, involves researchers immersing themselves in the daily lives of their subjects. This involvement is essential to understand their practices, rituals, social interactions, and overall way of life from an insider’s perspective, providing a rich, contextual understanding that enhances the depth and authenticity of my analysis.³ It allows researchers to understand behaviors and practices in their natural context, making the findings more relevant and grounded. Additionally, ethnographic research

³ Michael Agar, *Speaking of Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996).

can adapt to changes in the field setting, allowing for the exploration of unexpected phenomena.⁴ However, ethnography is also time-consuming, often requiring a significant time commitment. The presence of the researcher—in this case, my presence—can influence people's behavior, and the findings can be influenced by the researcher's own biases. Furthermore, ethnographic studies often focus on small, specific groups, making it difficult to generalize them to larger populations.

Autoethnography, on the other hand, is a form of ethnographic research where the researcher uses self-reflection and writing to explore their personal experiences and connect them to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography.⁵ The advantages of autoethnography include allowing researchers to draw on their own experiences to provide a unique, insider perspective and exploring the researcher's emotional and subjective experiences, adding depth to the understanding of cultural phenomena. It encourages researchers to be reflective about their own role and influence in the research process. However, its highly personal nature can lead to questions about the objectivity and reliability of the findings, and it often focuses on the researcher's own experiences, which may not be representative of broader cultural patterns. Writing about personal experiences and the experiences of others can also raise ethical issues, particularly regarding privacy and consent.⁶

I chose ethnography and autoethnography as my research methods for this book because they align perfectly with my objectives and my Arbëresh identity. As an insider, autoethnography allows me to delve deeply into my own experiences and reflections on the Arbëresh language and culture, providing a unique and intimate perspective.⁷

⁴ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 2011); Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁵ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.

⁶ *Ibid.*; Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁷ Carolyn Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Walnut

This method helps not only in documenting the nuances of our linguistic and cultural practices but also in preserving personal narratives that are often lost in more detached forms of research. Ethnography complements this by allowing a broader exploration of the community's practices and interactions from an immersive standpoint. By engaging directly with other members of the Arbëresh community, I could capture the richness of our cultural expressions and daily realities.

This dual approach of combining autoethnography and ethnography provides a comprehensive understanding of how the Arbëresh language and culture have been maintained and their current challenges. The ethnographic component enabled me to document the lived experiences of the Arbëresh people, their interactions with wider Italian society, and the dynamics of cultural integration. This approach ensures my work is deeply connected to the lived realities of the community, making it both a scholarly and a personal endeavor. By focusing on these methods, I aim to highlight the resilience of Arbëresh culture and the importance of preserving our linguistic heritage in the face of modern challenges.

1 A Journey of Self-Discovery: Conducting Ethnography in My Mother's Village

Going to my mother's village to conduct ethnographic research was a profound and complex experience laden with emotions and challenges. Growing up, I had heard many stories about this place, tales filled with nostalgia, laughter, and tears. However, living in those places and meeting those people firsthand was completely different. The journey began with a mix of anxiety and excitement. The familiarity of the culture, language, and traditions was comforting, yet at the same time, the awareness that I was not exactly one of them created a sense of distance. I was the daughter of a migrant, raised with two identities that often conflicted.

This dualism intensified during my stay there. Arriving and seeing familiar faces, smelling lovingly cooked food, hearing the sounds of village festivals, and participating in daily rituals felt like stepping into a story I had heard a thousand times but never lived. I was welcomed with affection and curiosity, but there was always a subtle veil of suspicion and unspoken expectations. My status as a researcher added another layer of complexity: I was there to observe and document but also to understand and, in some sense, to belong. The beginning was characterized by a sense of wonder and amazement. Every little detail of daily life seemed noteworthy. The way people interacted with each other, the gestures that accompanied conversations, the silences filled with meaning: everything contributed to creating a vivid and complex picture of the community. However, as time passed, I realized that I was not just an external observer. My roots, my family history, and my personal emotions inevitably influenced my perception and interpretation of the facts.

The decision to engage in autoethnography was particularly challenging. This method requires deep and continuous self-reflection as an integral part of the research. It means exposing one's vulnerabilities, biases, and emotions. This required confronting my own identity, inter-

nal conflicts, and family expectations. It forced me to dig deep within myself to recognize how my personal experience influenced my research work. I found myself grappling with feelings of inadequacy and disconnection. I often wondered if I was betraying the trust of the people who had welcomed me, fearing that I might not adequately represent their stories and lives. At the same time, I felt like a traitor to my researcher identity, fearing that I was not being sufficiently objective or detached. The challenges also manifested in the difficulty of balancing my role as a daughter and as a researcher. Meetings with relatives and acquaintances were often laden with expectations and emotional pressures. I had to be the affectionate and respectful daughter but also the attentive and detached researcher. This duality was exhausting and often left me feeling frustrated and unsuccessful.

One of the most significant difficulties was managing my emotional response to the environment and experiences. My personal connections to the place and people colored every interaction and every observation. For instance, visiting my grandparents' house, a place filled with childhood memories, triggered a flood of emotions that were hard to control. Such personal ties often blur the line between participant and observer, making it challenging to maintain a clear, analytical perspective.

The task of writing a diary and taking notes was another formidable challenge. Initially, I approached this with a sense of discipline and structure, hoping to document every detail meticulously. However, the reality of my daily interactions often made this difficult. In the heat of a conversation or during a significant event, it was impossible to take notes without breaking the flow or appearing intrusive. This led to a reliance on memory, which was not always reliable and often resulted in gaps in my documentation.

Moreover, there was a constant battle with self-censorship. Writing a diary meant exposing my innermost thoughts and feelings, which was daunting. I often found myself hesitating to document certain observations or emotions, fearing they might be misinterpreted or judged harshly by others, including my own family. This self-censorship some-

times led to a diluted version of events and emotions, compromising the authenticity of my autoethnographic account.

The process of self-reflection required in autoethnography was another area fraught with difficulty. Reflecting on my own biases, preconceptions, and emotional responses was uncomfortable and, at times, painful. There were moments when I had to confront aspects of my identity and past that I had not fully acknowledged or understood before. This introspection was essential for the integrity of my research, but it also opened up old wounds and insecurities.

Interacting with family members and community elders added another layer of complexity. These interactions were often loaded with expectations and cultural norms that I struggled to navigate. There was a delicate balance between showing respect and adhering to cultural practices while trying to gather honest and unfiltered data. I had to be careful not to offend or disrupt the natural flow of life in the community, which sometimes meant compromising on the depth of my inquiries.

In terms of methodological challenges, translating rich, lived experiences into academic language was particularly difficult. The nuances of local dialects, cultural idioms, and unspoken social norms were often lost in translation. This made it hard to convey the true essence of my findings in my notes and diary entries. The fear of misrepresentation was a constant concern, driving me to question the adequacy of my documentation and interpretation.

To manage these challenges, I developed several strategies. One was the use of reflective pauses—taking time at the end of each day to mentally revisit and process the day's events before documenting them. This allowed me to capture details that might have been overlooked in the moment. I also used voice recordings when appropriate, capturing conversations and ambient sounds that could later jog my memory or provide additional context to my written notes. Additionally, I sought feedback from my family and community members, sharing parts of my diary and notes with them to ensure accuracy and gain their

perspectives. This not only helped in validating my observations but also fostered a sense of collaboration and trust.

Emotionally, I found solace in discussing my experiences with peers and mentors who were familiar with the challenges of ethnographic research. Their insights and support were invaluable in helping me navigate the emotional rollercoaster and maintain my focus.

It was a deeply challenging yet enriching experience. The process required a delicate balance of emotional resilience, cultural sensitivity, and methodological rigor. Despite the difficulties, it provided profound insights into both the community and my own identity, ultimately enhancing the authenticity and depth of my research. Before digging into the details of my ethnographic work, I believe it's important to share a bit about my background and experiences. Being open about who I am and what has shaped my perspective is crucial for understanding the approach I took in my research. This context will also help explain the motivations behind the following chapters and why they were necessary for my study.

I grew up with a rich cultural heritage but never fully immersed myself in it. Over time, my connection to the language and customs faded, influencing my desire to reconnect with it and understand it more deeply. My professional life is dedicated to cultural research and education, driven by my own background and family stories. Furthermore, the challenges my mother faced due to her rural background and language barriers deeply influenced my perspective on cultural identity and education. I aim to highlight the voices and experiences of minority communities, exploring how they navigate their identities in broader societal contexts. Sharing my personal history and professional motivations provides a clearer lens through which my research can be understood and appreciated.

2 Background

I don't speak Arbëresh and only understand it in fragments, but despite the language barrier, my connection to it is complex. Growing up on the outskirts of Rome, I was surrounded by a community that had recently ascended to wealth. These were people who had worked hard to achieve their status, but with that success often came an unfortunate sense of superiority, especially toward new immigrants and minority cultures. This attitude created a tense and somewhat hostile environment, one where those who were different were subtly, and sometimes overtly, encouraged to blend in or risk being marginalized.

As a child, I was acutely aware of these unspoken pressures, even if I didn't fully understand them. I could sense the discomfort in my parents, especially my father, who was trying to navigate a society that often looked down on our heritage. At a certain point, when the social climate around us became increasingly challenging, my father made a decision that would profoundly impact our family: he decided that we should stop speaking Albanian at home. He believed that distancing ourselves from our heritage language would help us fit in better, that it would protect us from the discrimination and prejudice that seemed to lurk just beneath the surface of everyday interactions.

My mother, however, didn't share this view. She held onto our culture and language with a fierce love, understanding that they were integral parts of our identity. The thought of abandoning our language, even just within the walls of our home, was painful for her. She knew the value of maintaining that connection, not just for herself but for me as well. But in the end, my father's arguments—couched in what seemed like rationality and concern for our future—convinced her to go along with his decision, albeit reluctantly.

For years, the silence of our heritage language hung in the air of our home. It was an absence I didn't fully comprehend at the time, but I could feel its weight. There was a part of me that missed something I couldn't quite name, a part that felt disconnected from a world I had

only glimpsed in my parents' stories and memories. Yet I adapted to this new reality, as children often do, even as I sensed that something precious was slipping away.

As I grew older, things began to change. The world around us shifted, and so did the dynamics within our home. Albania started to open up to the West, and with this newfound openness came a resurgence of interest in our roots. My mother, who had never really let go of her love for our language, had been quietly studying contemporary Albanian, immersing herself in its nuances and complexities. She even began to publish articles on linguistics, channeling her passion into academic pursuits. This was more than just an intellectual exercise for her—it was a way of holding onto something that was slowly being eroded by time and circumstance.

Eventually, my mother's patience wore thin. She had tolerated the suppression of our language for years, but the growing disconnect was too much to bear. She began to push back, opening our home to refugees and embracing our heritage with renewed vigor. Arbëresh, the language that had been silenced for so long, once again found its place in our home, spoken with pride and love. My mother, in her quiet rebellion, was reclaiming a part of our identity that had nearly been lost.

By then, however, it was too late for me to fully reclaim what had been lost. The window of opportunity to learn and speak Arbëresh fluently had passed me by. I watched as my mother conversed with others in a language that should have been mine as well, feeling a pang of regret and a deep sense of loss. I could understand fragments, catch the meaning of certain phrases, but the fluency, the ease with which the words should have come to me, was missing.

Yet, despite this, all was not lost. My mother's passion and unwavering dedication to our culture and language had a profound impact on me. Even though I couldn't speak the language fluently, the values and stories she passed down to me became an integral part of who I am. Her love for our heritage was contagious, and it sparked in me a deep curiosity about my origins, a desire to understand and connect with the

culture that was such a significant part of my identity yet somehow just out of reach.

The emotional journey was not an easy one. There were times when I felt a deep sense of longing, a yearning for something I could never quite grasp. I mourned the loss of that direct connection to my roots, feeling as though I was caught between two worlds—neither fully Italian nor fully Arbëresh. But in that space, I found a unique identity, one shaped by the experiences and choices of my parents, by the cultural forces that had shaped our lives.

In the end, my mother's efforts were not in vain. While I may not speak Arbëresh fluently, the legacy of that language and culture lives on in me in other ways. It has shaped my values, my worldview, and my sense of self. The love and passion my mother had for our heritage have been passed down to me, not just in the form of words but also in the very fabric of who I am. And, perhaps because of these challenges and losses, my connection to my roots is even deeper, driven by a desire to understand and honor the culture that shaped me, even if it's in a way that is uniquely my own.

My Dual Heritage: Growing Up Between Cultures and Embracing My Arbëresh Roots

I was raised in Rome, a bustling metropolis teeming with history and cultural diversity. Despite growing up in such a vibrant city, my connection to my Arbëresh roots was tenuous. My grandparents, who were part of the Arbëresh community, lived far away. As a child, I spent little time with them, and although I initially understood their language, the infrequent visits meant that my grasp of it faded over time. Now, as an adult, I struggle to comprehend it fully, a fact that fills me with both regret and determination.

For many years, I concealed my dual heritage. During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy was marked by significant political turmoil and a surge of nationalist sentiment that often manifested as racism toward minorities.

This period, known as the Years of Lead, saw violent clashes between far-right and far-left factions, creating an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Minorities, including linguistic ones like the Arbëresh, faced discrimination and marginalization. The Arbëresh people, descendants of Albanian refugees who fled to Italy in the 15th century, have managed to preserve their unique language and cultural practices for centuries. However, in the politically charged climate of my childhood, admitting to a mixed heritage could invite prejudice and social ostracism.

Growing up in this environment, I learned to navigate the complex social landscape by downplaying my Arbëresh identity. At school, I rarely mentioned my grandparents or the few Arbëresh words I knew. The fear of being seen as different or lesser was a powerful deterrent. The media and political discourse of the time did little to dispel these fears. The Italian political scene was dominated by figures who often used divisive rhetoric, further entrenching the societal divide.

My mother's decision to reconnect with her Arbëresh roots came as a surprise. For reasons that remained mysterious to me at the time, she chose to embrace her identity openly. This shift was not sudden but gradual, as if she had been slowly gathering the courage to reclaim a part of herself that had been buried for too long. Her determination to revive our cultural heritage was met with mixed emotions on my part. I felt a deep-seated reluctance born out of years of suppression and fear. However, my mother's enthusiasm was infectious, and slowly, I began to feel a stirring of curiosity about my Arbëresh background.

The political climate of Italy during the 1970s and 1980s was a critical factor in shaping our identities. The rise of right-wing politics, marked by the presence of parties like the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), fostered an environment where xenophobia and racism could thrive. The left-wing response, although advocating for workers' rights and social equality, often did not directly address the issues faced by ethnic and linguistic minorities. This polarized landscape left little room for the nuanced identities of those like the Arbëresh, whose unique cultural heritage was often overlooked or undervalued.

Living as part of a linguistic minority in this period was particularly challenging. The Arbëresh language, a variant of Albanian mixed with Italian, was seen as a relic of the past by many. Efforts to preserve it were often met with indifference or outright hostility. Schools primarily focused on teaching standard Italian, and local dialects or minority languages were sometimes discouraged. This systemic bias contributed to the gradual erosion of the Arbëresh language among younger generations.

My mother's efforts to reconnect with our heritage involved immersing us in cultural practices. She began cooking traditional Arbëresh dishes, recounting folklore and stories passed down through generations, and even encouraging us to visit Portocannone more frequently. These experiences were eye-opening, revealing a rich tapestry of history and tradition that had been hidden beneath layers of social conformity and fear.

As I grew older, my perspective on my heritage began to shift. My initial reluctance gave way to a profound sense of pride and curiosity. I started to understand the significance of our traditions and the resilience of the Arbëresh community. Their ability to maintain a distinct cultural identity despite centuries of external pressure was nothing short of remarkable. This realization was empowering, prompting me to delve deeper into my roots and embrace my dual heritage with newfound confidence.

The process of embracing my Arbëresh identity was not without its struggles. Learning the language anew was particularly daunting. I began by listening to old recordings of my grandparents and reading whatever literature I could find in Arbëresh. It was a slow and sometimes frustrating process, filled with moments of doubt and insecurity. However, each small victory, whether it was understanding a phrase or successfully cooking a traditional dish, reinforced my commitment.

Visiting Portocannone as an adult was a transformative experience. The village, with its narrow streets and old stone houses, held a charm that was both familiar and foreign. Interacting with the residents, many of whom remembered my grandparents fondly, provided a sense of

belonging that I had long sought. These visits allowed me to see the world through my mother's eyes, to appreciate the cultural wealth that had been part of her upbringing.

The broader political context of Italy continued to evolve, and while issues of racism and discrimination remained, there was also a growing recognition of the importance of cultural diversity. This shift in societal attitudes provided a more supportive environment for exploring and celebrating minority identities. The resurgence of interest in local dialects and traditions across Italy mirrored my own journey of rediscovery.

Reflecting on my experiences, I realize that my initial reluctance to embrace my Arbëresh heritage was deeply rooted in the fear of rejection and prejudice. However, my mother's commitment to our culture demonstrated the power of resilience and the importance of preserving one's identity. Her example taught me that embracing our roots does not mean rejecting our present but rather enriching it with the wisdom and traditions of the past.

Growing up with a dual heritage in a politically tumultuous Italy presented significant challenges. The fear of discrimination and the pressure to conform led me to suppress my Arbëresh identity for many years. However, my mother's decision to reconnect with our roots and her efforts to immerse us in our cultural heritage ignited a journey of self-discovery and pride. Despite the difficulties, embracing my Arbëresh background has enriched my life, providing a deeper understanding of my family's history and a greater appreciation for the resilience of our community. As I continue to explore and celebrate my heritage, I am reminded of the importance of preserving our cultural identities and the strength that comes from embracing our true selves.

3 My Mother's Journey: From Portocannone to a Life of Learning

My mother was born in the small Arbëresh village of Portocannone in southern Italy. The Arbëresh communities, with their unique blend of Albanian and Italian heritage, are often seen as very patriarchal and conservative. While this might be true in some cases, my mother's story shows that it's not always so.

Of all his children, my grandfather chose my mother to pursue higher education because she was the most deserving and determined. This was unusual and forward-thinking, especially in a time and place where educational opportunities for women were limited. My grandfather's support played a crucial role in shaping my mother's future, allowing her to break free from traditional constraints. She was often told that, as a girl, her place was at home, learning household chores, but she proved her parents wrong by excelling in her studies.

After World War II, my mother moved to Rome, a city still recovering from the war. The transition was tough. She faced a lot of racism and prejudice because she was from the countryside and had to learn Italian at school. Her Arbëresh dialect was looked down upon, and her rural background made her an easy target for discrimination. She told me about the hurtful names she was called and the isolation she felt while sitting alone during lunch breaks.

Despite these challenges, my mother never gave up. She often talked about a pivotal moment during her early school years in Rome. At first, she struggled with Italian, but then she realized she had an unexpected advantage. Being bilingual meant she had a better grasp of grammar than her classmates. Understanding two languages allowed her to pronounce a wider range of sounds and understand linguistic structures better. This realization sparked a passion for learning languages that would shape her life.

By the end of her studies, my mother had mastered six languages, speaking each fluently. This skill became a key part of her teaching philosophy. She would tell her struggling students that hard work pays off, using her own experience as an example. Her ability to relate to and communicate with students from different backgrounds gave her a unique edge as a teacher. She remembered the joy of being able to read literature in its original language and encouraged her students to reach similar heights.

My mother's background helped her connect deeply with students from working-class families, immigrants, and refugees. She understood their struggles and used her insights to inspire and motivate them. She often said that what seems like a disadvantage can be a strength, depending on how you look at it. Her empathy and understanding created a supportive learning environment where students felt seen and valued.

My mother's teaching career was full of stories that showed her ability to turn obstacles into opportunities. She shared her struggles and triumphs, illustrating how perseverance can overcome any barrier. Her students admired her not just for her linguistic skills but also for her wisdom and kindness. She helped a young girl from a rural background who was mocked for her accent, just as she herself had been. The girl went on to become a successful lawyer, crediting my mother's encouragement.

One memorable story involved a young refugee who had trouble adjusting to life in Italy. He faced language barriers, cultural shock, and the trauma of displacement. My mother took him under her wing, using her multilingual abilities to help him feel at home. She taught him Italian through his native language, making learning easier for him. In time, he excelled in his studies and integrated into the community. My mother's impact on his life was profound, showing the power of education and empathy. This student, now an engineer, frequently wrote to thank her for the foundation she provided.

Throughout her life, my mother stayed connected to her Arbëresh heritage. She cooked traditional dishes, celebrated Arbëresh holidays, and told stories of Portocannone. These practices kept our cultural roots

alive and gave us a sense of identity. Her ability to navigate between cultures and languages enriched our family life and taught us to appreciate diversity. Every family gathering was a lesson in history and culture, where she would share songs and dances from her youth.

As I look back on my mother's journey, I am amazed by her determination and resilience. She faced significant challenges, from the prejudice of post-war Italy to balancing multiple identities. Yet she never let these obstacles define her. Instead, she used them to build a life of purpose and impact. She repeatedly said that the more she learned about other cultures, the more she understood and appreciated her own.

Her legacy shows the power of education and the importance of embracing one's heritage. She taught me that our background, no matter how complicated, can be a source of strength. Her story reminds us that with perseverance and a positive outlook, we can turn our disadvantages into advantages. I remember a time when I struggled with my own identity, feeling neither fully Italian nor Arbëresh. My mother's wisdom helped me see that I was enriched by both cultures, not torn between them.

My mother's life also offers valuable lessons for today's world, where issues of identity and integration are still relevant. Her ability to empathize with and support marginalized students provides a model for inclusive education. Her message that what seems like a disadvantage can be a strength is especially relevant in our globalized world. She inspired not only her students but also her colleagues, who admired her innovative teaching methods and her dedication to her students' well-being.

My mother's journey from Portocannone to becoming a respected educator and polyglot is a remarkable story of resilience, determination, and the power of education. Her life challenges the stereotypes of the Arbëresh community, showing that change is possible within traditional structures. She remains an inspiration to her students and to anyone striving to overcome adversity and make a difference. Her story celebrates cultural heritage, the pursuit of knowledge, and the belief in the potential of every individual.

4 Albanian and Arbëreshë: Two Kindred Cultures

This chapter explores the deep-rooted connections between the Albanian people and the Arbëreshë community, descendants of Albanian refugees who settled in Italy during the 15th century. Specifying the relationship between these two cultures is crucial for several reasons. First, it underscores the shared heritage and linguistic ties that persist despite geographical separation. This understanding is vital for appreciating the cultural richness and diversity within the Albanian diaspora. Moreover, it highlights the importance of preserving these unique cultural identities, which contribute to the broader tapestry of human civilization. By recognizing and studying the links between Albanian and Arbëreshë cultures, we gain insights into their historical migration, resilience, and the ways in which they maintain their distinct traditions and customs in a globalized world.

Albanian, an Indo-European language, is primarily spoken in Albania. It is the only modern representative of a unique branch of the Indo-European language family.¹ The origins of the name “Albanian,” which initially referred to a small region in central Albania, and its current official name “Shqip” or “Shqipëri,” possibly derived from a term meaning “pronounce clearly, intelligibly,” are still debated. The word “Albanian” has been documented since the time of Ptolemy. In Calabrian/Sicilian Albanian, the language’s name is “Arbresh,” in Modern Greek, it is “Arvanítis,” and in Turkish, it is “Arnaut,” indicating early transmission through Greek.²

¹ Eric P. Hamp provides comprehensive details on the origins, dialects, history, and characteristics of the Albanian language, while Adam Hyllested and Brian D. Joseph examine the internal structure of Albanian, its dialects, and its relationship to other Indo-European languages. See Eric P. Hamp, “Albanian Language,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last updated October 25, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Albanian-language>; Adam Hyllested and Brian D. Joseph, “Albanian,” in *The Indo-European Language Family*, ed. Thomas Olander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 223–245.

² The *Albanian Etymological Dictionary* explores the etymology of Albanian words and their Indo-European roots. Vladimir Orel, *Albanian Etymological Dictionary*

The two main dialects of Albanian are Gheg in the north and Tosk in the south, divided by the Shkumbin River. Gheg and Tosk have been diverging for over a millennium, though their less extreme forms are mutually intelligible. Gheg has more pronounced subvarieties, especially in the north and east, including the dialects of Shkodër, the north-eastern Skopska Crna Gora region of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and the isolated village of Arbanasi near Zadar on the Croatian coast. Arbanasi, founded in the early 18th century by refugees from the Montenegrin coast, has about 2,000 speakers.³

All Albanian dialects spoken in Italian and Greek enclaves are of the Tosk variety and are closely related to the dialect of Çamëria in southern Albania. These dialects resulted from poorly understood population movements in the 13th and 15th centuries. The Italian enclaves—nearly 50 scattered villages—were likely founded by emigrants escaping Turkish rule in Greece.⁴ A few isolated dialects of south Tosk origin are spoken in Bulgaria and Turkish Thrace, though their origins are unclear. The language is still used in Mandritsa, Bulgaria, near the border with Edirne, and in an offshoot of this village surviving in Mándres near Kilkís in Greece, dating from the Balkan Wars. A Tosk enclave near Melitopol in Ukraine seems to be a recent settlement from Bulgaria. The Albanian dialects of Istria and Syrmia (Srem) are now extinct.⁵ The official language, written in a standard Roman-style orthography adopted in 1909, was based on the south Gheg dialect of Elbasan until World War II and has since been modeled on Tosk. Albanian speakers in Kosovo and North Macedonia speak eastern varieties of Gheg but have widely adopted a common orthography with Albania since 1974.

(Leiden: Brill, 1998).

³ Eric P. Hamp discusses the division of Albanian into Gheg and Tosk dialects, highlighting that Gheg is spoken north of the Shkumbin River and Tosk to the south. He also details the regions where these dialects are spoken and their mutual intelligibility. See Hamp, “Albanian Language.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For historical developments in the Albanian verb system and its Indo-European connections, see Jay H. Jasanoff, *Historical Linguistics and the Indo-European Verb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Before 1909, the limited preserved literature was written in local make-shift Italianate or Hellenizing orthographies or even in Turko-Arabic characters.⁶ A few brief written records from the 15th century survive, the first being a baptismal formula from 1462. Most books from the 16th and 17th centuries originated in the Gheg area and reflect Roman Catholic missionary activities. Much of the limited 19th-century literature was produced by exiles. Perhaps the earliest significant literary work is the 18th-century poetry of Gjul Variboba from San Giorgio, Calabria. Some literary production continued in the 19th century in the Italian enclaves, but no similar activity is recorded in the Greek areas. These early documents show a language similar to the current one but with marked dialect peculiarities, valuable for linguistic study.⁷

The Indo-European origin of Albanian was recognized by German philologist Franz Bopp in 1854, with further details elaborated by Gustav Meyer in the 1880s and 1890s. Linguistic refinements were presented by the Danish linguist Holger Pedersen and the Austrian linguist Norbert Jokl. Examples illustrating the relationship of Albanian to Indo-European include *pesë* (five) from **pénkwe*, *zjarm* (fire) from **gwhermos*, *natë* (night) from **nokwt-*, *dhëndër* (son-in-law) from **gēmāter-*, *gjarpër* (snake) from **sérpōñ-*, *bjer* (bring!) from **bhere*, *djeg* (I burn) from **dheghwō*, *kam* (I have) from **kapmi*, *pata* (I had) from **pot-*, *pjek* (I roast) from **pekwō*, and *thom*, *thotë* (I say, he says) from **k'ēmi*, **k'ēt*.⁸ The verb system includes many archaic traits, such as distinct active and middle personal endings and the change of a stem vowel e in the present to o (from **ē*) in the past tense, shared with Baltic languages. Examples include *mbledh* (gathers, transitive) and *mblidhet* (gathers, intransitive) in the present tense and *mblodha* (I gathered) in the past. Despite phonetic changes and borrowed words, the continuity of the Indo-Eu-

⁶ Oda Buchholz and Wilfried Fiedler, *Albanische Grammatik* (Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1987).

⁷ Robert Elsie provides an extensive overview of Albanian literature, including early written records, the influence of Roman Catholic missionary activities, and significant literary works such as the poetry of Gjul Variboba from the 18th century. Robert Elsie, *Albanian Literature: A Short History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

⁸ Ibid.

ropean heritage in Albanian has been underrated.⁹ Albanian shows no close affinity to other Indo-European languages; it is the sole modern survivor of its subgroup. It seems likely that the Balto-Slavic group was its nearest kin in early times. Both Dacian (or Daco-Mysian) and Illyrian have been tentatively considered its ancestors or nearest relatives.¹⁰

Albanian grammar is similar to other European languages.¹¹ Nouns have gender, number, and three or four cases. Uniquely, nouns are inflected with suffixes to show definite or indefinite meaning, e.g., *bukë* (bread) and *buka* (the bread). Adjectives and dependent nouns follow the noun they modify and require an agreeing particle. For example, in *një burrë i madh* (a big man), *burrë* (man) is modified by *madh* (big), which is preceded by *i*, which agrees with man. In *dy burra të mëdhenj* (two big men), *mëdhenj* (big, plural masculine) follows *burra* (men) and is preceded by *të*, which agrees with the noun. Verbs have many forms similar to French or Italian and are quite irregular. Noun plurals are notably irregular. When a definite noun is the direct object, an objective pronoun repeating this information must be inserted in the verb phrase, e.g., *i-a dhashë librin atij* (literally, him-it I-gave the-book to-him) translates to “I gave the book to him.” Overall, Albanian grammar and formal distinctions resemble Modern Greek and Romance languages, especially Romanian. The sounds of Albanian suggest Hungarian or Greek, but Gheg’s nasal vowels are distinctive.¹²

Although Albanian has borrowed extensively from its neighboring languages, there are very few traces of contact with Ancient Greek.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tijmen Pronk explores the Balto-Slavic branch of the Indo-European languages and discusses the shared innovations and historical connections between these languages, providing a context for understanding the early links between Albanian and the Balto-Slavic group. Tijmen Pronk, “Balto-Slavic,” in *The Indo-European Language Family*, ed. Thomas Olander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 269–292.

¹¹ For more on the unique position of Albanian within the Indo-European family, the morphological and phonological characteristics of Albanian and its similarities with other European languages, and an in-depth analysis of Albanian’s grammatical features and its historical development, see Hyllested and Joseph, “Albanian.”

¹² Hamp “Albanian Language.”