

## The Arbëresh Identity through the Myth of Language and Culture in the Poetic Creativity of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio

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### Abstract

Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, one of the leading figures of the contemporary Arbëresh literature, is the most mature voice and the most productive poet of all nowadays Arbëresh poets. He is an author who uses the bilingual verse in Albanian and Italian languages with an extraordinary ability, settling in perfect harmony his poetries, which have artistic independence in each language and are original reproductions in both corresponding languages. In this regard, plays an important role even its culture, interlaced simultaneously with two traditions, the Italian and the Arbëresh, and certainly his proficiency in both Italian and Albanian languages. In this article we aim the identification of the themes and the main motives in the poetic creativity of the author, which refer to the most important aspects of the Arbëresh community, and also to the human universal aspects, avoiding themes and motives dealing with more detailed or less significant aspects. Eventually, we did not try to remain in a simple thematic presentation during the identification of the main themes that permeate the poetic creativity of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio. We tried to get into the history, into the mentality and into the culture of the Arbëresh community, because to determine the literature themes it does not mean to separate it from the history, but to give the deserved position to the history of the mentality, the customs, the ideology, and the manner of time and space perception.

**Keywords:** myth of the homeland, Arbëresh identity, the village, the escapes, the language.

### 1. Introduction

The multidimensional creativity, both in prose and poetry justifies convincingly the intensive commitment of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio about the issues that concern his Arbëresh community. Literary criticism, as the art of interpretation, imply the usage of a network of concepts and explanatory categories, where is also present the thematic one. There is an organic and inevitable relationship in the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, regarding the perception of the theme that involves "the argument" and "the inspiring idea", so it is a combination of the objective and subjective matters. Every present theme in his poetries is encountered even in the reader's experience, especially in that of the Arbëresh reader. The themes express the moment of recognition of the Arbëresh unit, but with the universal theme present in his poetic creativity are expressed even the moments of recognition of the entire human society:

...s'di ku të kërkoni vendet kosmike  
e të vdekurvet të mi të dashur.  
Por edhe ata neve të gjallë. [Thomse]  
Na bjerrin sysh e del se jemi na  
Në përfundim që s'jemi.<sup>1</sup>

... I do not know where to look for cosmic countries  
of my beloved dead.  
And they likewise to us living. [I think]  
Noticing and it results we are  
At the end that we are not.

The poetic motives, as the smallest units linked to the theme, are an element of the contents or situations that function as a thematic system of the writer's poetry, thus contributing to its structure. Some motives like: the village, the

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (2004). *Atje kam (La mia Morea)*, bilingual verse, Lussografica di Caltanissetta, p. 84

escape, the language etc, are encountered frequently in the poetries of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio turning into genuine keywords.

In this article we aim to interpret the poetic creativity of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio through a particular historical context, within the spirit of the time, the opinion's environment and the intellectual atmosphere of the second half of the last century and the early XXI century based on the principle of cause, as a product of the author's biography and psychology, and as a product of the social and psychological conditions of the Arbëresh community, to which he belongs, yet as an Italian and European citizen.

## 2. The Arbëresh Identity

The main themes around which revolves the majority of the poetries of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, is the preserving of the ethnic Arbëresh identity, of the community where he belongs or more accurately of the Albanian part of this identity that constitutes the main concern of the poet. This "myth of the Arbëresh resistance" the professor Nasho Jorgaqi would designate as "The key theme" of Di Maggio that, "...coexists in symbiosis with the myth of the decay risks, the darkening of the Arbëresh day, and simultaneously with the myth of the efforts to revival the Arbëresh in the new circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

In a longeval coexistence of the Arbëresh community with the natives of Italy there is naturally vulnerable the Arbëresh identity. This ethnic identity has endured till nowadays by surviving to the complete elimination. The two key elements that have contributed decisively to its preservation are the Arbëresh language and culture. These elements are inextricably linked to the first, which is identified and equated with the language and the culture, without which there can not exist a nation or a minority community. Having perfectly understood this, in a significant part of it, the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio preaches the preserving of the Arbëresh language and culture in order to cherish the Arbëresh identity. There is no precise thematic difference between the identity, the language and the culture, that are inextricably interlaced through all the poetic creativity of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio.

The Arbëresh community of Italy has been and still is a minority community without its own institutions in this homeland, within another homeland, and whose role have been played by the Arbëresh language and culture. Both these institutions have cherished the part of the Albanian identity to the Arbëresh people. The ethnic identity of the Arbëresh community nowadays has changed. The above reflections are found in almost all the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio. Referring to his poetry (which is motivated and derives from the reality and the conditions in which is nowadays the Arbëresh community in Italy) confidently, we have the right to speak about a triple ethnic identity of this community, Sicilian-Italian-Albanian.

For 500 years the Arbëresh identity has been between the Italian and Albanian existence. Two different languages and cultures in collision. This collision has led the above transformation of the Arbëresh identity, which risks to be reduced into a dual ethnic identity Sicilian-Italian thus eliminating the Albanian identity of the community. The idea of the existence of a triple identity of the Arbëresh people is evident in the following verses:

*I duhej të kishim tri kurme  
e tre shpirtra  
e të vdisnim tri herë  
tri herë ngjallur e prapë vdekur  
për tre atdherat tanë...<sup>3</sup>*

*We should have three bodies  
and three souls  
and to die three times  
three times again aroused and again dead  
for our three homelands ...*

The Sicilian-Italian identity has got precedence towards the Albanian identity, and this is favored by the circumstances: the economic, political and cultural integration of the Arbëresh in the Italian society, while the Albanian identity is endangered by the first two, which are in collision (even though not intentionally and consciously). In this regard, the intervention of identity "lëtirë" ("Italian") in the Albanian identity, is fatal. This fatality is conditioned by the circumstances, by the vital needs:

*Këtu nuk ka bukë  
për të gjithë.  
E kanë të drejtë*

*There is no bread  
for all.  
They are right*

<sup>2</sup> Nasho Jorgaqi (2007). *Poeti i Itakës arbëreshe, -Ishuj- Zef Schirò Di Maggio, OMBRA GVG-URA E VJETER, pp.7,8*

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (December, 1994). *Poezi gushtore e tjera, Ass Culturale, p. 8*

*prindërit arbëreshë  
që dolën e gjetën  
punë larg Horës,  
kur u urdhërojnë bijve  
gjuhën e bukës  
sepse ti nuk fiton bukë  
me të folmen arbëreshe,  
e folmja arbëreshe  
është ves i paarsyeshëm,  
e si i tillë s'të hap  
derën e prodhimit.<sup>4</sup>*

*the Arbëresh parents  
who went and found  
job away from Hora,  
where are ordered the children  
the language of bread  
because you do not earn food  
with the Arbëresh dialect,  
and Arbëresh speech  
is irrational habit,  
as such it does not open  
the production door.*

In his poetries, Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio has taken over the role of a capable and well focused psychologist! The psychological therapy, that the poet seeks to make to the Arbëresh with his entirety of the poetic creativity, intends to avoid the unification of the three spirits that characterize the Arbëresh, because if that happen, the loss of the Albanian identity would be inevitable!

*E posa kemi tre shpirtra  
mund të propozohet një mënyrë  
shpëtimi për të ardhmen:  
duhet të mos njësohen there  
shpirtrat  
por të kujdesohet rritja  
e dalluar e ndarë  
për sa t'jetë e mundshme....<sup>5</sup>*

*As we have three souls  
there may be proposed a salvation  
manner for the future:  
should not be equivalent  
spirits  
but to care about the increase  
distinguished, separated  
as much as possible....*

The poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, although in its majority is dedicated to the Albanian identity of the Arbëresh, does not deny the other identities. In fact, in the poetries of the writer can not be blamed the domestic Italian language and culture, which are wonderful, and their values are indisputable, but the Arbëresh people who besides the local language and culture do not attempt to preserve even the Albanian language and culture of the Arbëresh ancestors.

While on his poetries is strongly felt the Albanian identity, on the rest -concerning the Sicilian and Italian ones- is felt less (to the modern poetry writing manner) it comes in adverse outlook. The Albanian reader in the poetries of the writer Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio considers as an enemy the interference of the "ëlitërë" identity in the Albanian identity. The poet sees the emigration from the second homeland, the marriages outside the community, the globalization, the consumption society etc, as a threat to the Arbëresh for the loss of the Albanian identity. The poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio is a warning in this regard.

Our Albanian criticism has not been dealing enough with the identity issues in the work of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio. We mean the Albanian identity to the Arbëresh, which coexists and survives between the Sicilian and Italian identities, we are speaking about the sensation that recently this Albanian identity of the Arbëresh is considered part of the whole Albanian that permeates the poetries and the last poetic books of the writer. In the recent years, the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio is not simply a poetry of "the island", isolated, but it appears as an Albanian poetry. Yet, his poetry takes universal values if we consider the fact that the risks towards the ethnic, linguistic and cultural Albanian identity of the Arbëresh community, threaten even the minority communities around the world. In his poetries, the call he makes to the Albanians to preserve their language and culture in order to have an ethnic Albanian identity, is a call made to all the minority communities and also to the nations in the context of the globalization that threatens the language, the culture and the identity of each state.

### 3. The Myth of the Arbëresh Language and Culture

The poetic concern of this theme is one of the main writer's promoters. The romantic Arbëresh patriots were well aware that a nation can not exist without its language, the same did Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, from this point of view -a peculiar contemporary romantic- is convinced that the Albanian part of the Arbëresh can not be preserved without

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (1981) *Gjuha e bukës, Kopica dhe ndryshku, Rilindja, Prishtinë*, p.83

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.* p.97

preserving the Albanian language. It is this motto that has led and still leads the writer, Zef Skirò Maxho, not only to his poetry, but also in his daily life activities. If there will be written the biography of the poet's linguistic contribution, it would result extremely rich, but we will suffice mentioning a peak moment which is his collaboration with "Mondo Albanese" ("Albanian world").

The poetry books where Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio treats the problem of the Arbëresh language, are several. Amongst them we are mentioning "Kopica dhe ndryshku" ("The moth and the rust"), "Sunata" ("The sonata"), "Më parë se të ngrysët" ("Just before the dark"), etc. This type of thematic poetry is an awareness on what is happening, an awareness on the risk towards the Arbëresh language, a call for its preservation.

In the preamble of the "Kopica dhe ndryshku" book's author, is referred that the content of these poetries is a remark addressed to the Arbëresh on their disguised indifference in preserving the ethnic Arbëresh identity. In the following verses the author explodes in an open and clear call directed to the Arbëresh to preserve their own language, which he calls a "treasure", that identifies his Arbëresh being. The risk comes from the Italian culture, whose contact is inevitable, and also by the oblivion of "the Arbëresh personality".

*More Arbëresh në gjysmë gjumë  
kopica e ndryshku  
të hanë thesarin  
kopica e ndryshku  
të grijnë të folmen  
kopica e ndryshku  
të shtrëmbërojnë identitetin!  
Kopica e ndryshku:  
pushteti i kulturës së huaj  
pushteti i fjalëve të huaja  
pushteti i harresës  
së personalitetit arbëresh...<sup>6</sup>*

*You Arbëresh half asleep  
the moth and the rust  
eat your treasure  
the moth and the rust  
mince your dialect  
the moth and the rust  
distort your identity!  
The moth and the rust:  
the power of the foreign culture  
the power of the foreign words  
the power of forgetfulness  
of Arbëresh's personality...*

The Italian existence with the language, the culture and the involvement of the Arbëresh in various life aspects, have left consequences to the Arbëresh over the years and nowadays the risk becomes greater and more indistinguishable than ever, because the Arbëresh heritage is being eroded inside and outside, by the moth and the rust, from the consumption society. The poet sympathizes with the Arbëresh, because the language of the nation they are living integrates in various life aspects and this is a necessity. Through the Arbëresh language is not earned the living, but "The man is fed only with food?" writes with irony the poet!

*nevojë buke  
dyert ua hapën dialekteve  
italiane që gjurmë  
të thella e ndikime të pandreqshme  
lanë në gjuhën tonë;  
pastaj kultura lëtire<sup>7</sup>  
aq mendimet na i pushtoi...  
sa ditaditës humbëm  
shumicën e  
fjalëve tona.  
Por sot  
më i madhi rrezik gjarpëron  
i hollë pa zhurmë  
me hapa të mëndafshhtë  
të hyn te shtëpia  
të vjen në mendje  
të shket ndër fjalët  
vetiu:  
konsumi!<sup>8</sup>*

*food need  
opened the doors to the Italian  
dialects that deep  
traces and irremediable impacts  
left in our language;  
then Italian culture  
so captured our thoughts ...  
And day by day lost  
most of  
our words.  
But today  
wanders the greatest risk  
slender silently  
by silky steps  
enters your house  
comes to your mind  
floats among your words  
spontaneously:  
consumption!*

<sup>6</sup> Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio (1981). *Kopica dhe ndryshku*, Palermo, author's manuscript, p.1

<sup>7</sup> Italian

Although the poet clearly identifies in his creativity the risks towards the Arbëresh language and culture, the issues are bigger and more complicated, and the solution becomes even more difficult. Nowadays, to all these are added and joined also the way of society organization, the mentality and reality of consumption, the domination of technology, the always increasing dependence from the biggest centers, and this risk becomes even greater in the context of globalization and modernization of the society. For reasons of obvious evidencing in the poetries of the Arbëresh writer, all the above mentioned risks, which threaten the Arbëresh existence Anton Nikë Berisha calls the poetry of Skirò Di Zef Maxho "expression of the awareness", poetry that "...articulates the concerns, the sorrow and the protest of the author on various phenomena associated with this world; from one side the necessity to continue the spiritual revival, and on the other hand, the exposing of the consequences towards the impact of the consumption society ..."<sup>9</sup>

Globalization is a chain of processes concerning changes in the economic, political and cultural aspects of the world's countries, which undoubtedly has affected even Italy, including the Arbëresh. In these modern times, the western culture and the Italian in particular, using the strong means of media, has launched an extensive onset against other cultures, including minorities -in our case even the Arbëresh culture- without taking into consideration the fundamental values of their culture. For this reason, the countries which strive to preserve their cultural values, the acquaintance with the consequences and impact of the globalization process has become a very important challenge. This challenge is also evident in the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio.

#### 4. Conclusions

The poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio, one of the most distinguishable personalities of modern times in the field of Albanian literature, is a path that provides the Arbëresh world recognition from different perspectives, focusing especially on highlighting its Arbëresh being and identity preservation, as well as on the risks that threaten it.

In the context of Arbëresh community to which he belongs, we can say that Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio is a poet with clear targets and leader of contemporary Arbëresh world through his ideals.

The epic and lyric poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio brings a great thematic variety demonstrating the deep psychological recognition of the Arbëresh community. The theme of epic poetry which belongs to the early poetical creativity, is reversed, detailed and expanded in the lyric poetry with a high artistic sensitivity which captures the Arbëresh life in its entirety and represents it with a rich figuration, emphasized by humor, irony, grotesque and absurd of the modern times where is involved even the Arbëresh community.

The themes of the poetries of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio convey to us his way of perceiving the reality. He sees the world through these themes, interpretes it through them, and only through them he can describe it. The themes treated by the poet are deeply related to himself, and he knows very well how to orientate, because he has experienced and meditated on them pretty well. The educated and careful reader, can easily recognize the characteristic pen of this author and through reading the author's work, the reader finds his world. Although the pessimism is apparent in some poetries, in the entirety poetries of the Arbëresh poet, dominates the optimism about the preservation of the Albanian identity despite the numerous risks threatening it. The symbol of identity preservation and that of the Arbëresh-Albanian language in the poetry of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio is undoubtedly the village, and in his poetries are also present the estimations done to him on this motive. Nevertheless, the poet requires something more, he requires the unification of the Arbëresh language with the standard Albanian language, certainly without losing its unique character. This is a romantic ideal, peculiarity of his predecessors as well.

The daily Arbëresh reality is shown through the poetry, as a special linguistic structure which simultaneously enters and becomes part of the artistic resource and collective memory of the Arbëresh world, and is also an artistic reality constituting the subjective and individual creativity of Giuseppe Schirò Di Maggio.

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