Research Article

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Women's Role in Preserving Identity and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Arbëresh Communities of Calabria, Italy

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Abstract

Women's cultural heritages are collections of oral histories, songs, narrations, dances, and culinary and traditional knowledge that are preserved and passed from one generation to another, to document and honour the contributions from the society/community as a whole. In Arbëresh communities, women play nurturing roles in the family. As mothers, they raise babies, nurse and teach them the norms and values of the society. They are the primary caretakers of children and elders. They also play an important role in the transmission and conservation of language as an important pillar of Arbëresh identity to the new generations as mediators between the culture of the country of origin and the culture of the country in which the Arbëresh community resides. A major part of the society's collective memory is women's intangible cultural heritage. Over hundreds of years of historical evolution, women in Arbëresh communities managed to synthesize some or all of these influences.

Keywords: *Women's Role, Arbëresh Communities, Italy*

1. Introduction

The Arbëresh communities in Calabria settled in this region during the 15th century as a result of the Ottoman invasion of Albania and the Balkans. Primarily, they established themselves in hilly and mountainous villages across three provinces of Calabria: Catanzaro, Cosenza, and Crotone, ultimately forming a total of around 33 Arbëresh settlements. The history of these Arbëresh communities and their centuries-long separation from their homeland have been closely tied to their geographical environment, difficult living conditions, and the socio-economic and religious circumstances of the feudal system and Italian politics. The geography of these settlements was instrumental in safeguarding their customs and cultural heritage for five centuries, thereby protecting their distinct identity from absorption into mainstream culture. However, at the same time, it posed economic challenges to their development and progress (Conti & Marquet, 1988, p. 56; Morelli, 2024). The Albanian communities in Calabria maintained a strong sense of isolation, deeply entrenched in their long-standing traditions, thus preserving a largely autonomous history spanning centuries. Over the course of time, they underwent substantial cultural changes as a result of the dominant Italian

culture and the influences of economic, political, and social power, resulting in the marginalization of the Albanian community within Calabrian society (Bolognari, 1988, p. 24). The migration of these communities has had a significant impact, altering their sense of identity and social organisation. These transformations are evident in modifications to cultural symbols, changes in behaviour, the representation of traditions, shifts in social organisations, and altered value systems. Bolognari notes (2014, p. 11) that Arbëresh communities have undergone significant transformations due to migration, leading to a more fluid and complex identity.

Women have continued to play a vital role in protecting and passing down Arbëresh cultural traditions despite the difficulties presented by migration and social transformation. The historical record has frequently neglected the role of women in this process, effectively obscuring their contributions. Similar to Latin and Greek societies, the Arbëresh culture is also deeply rooted in the Mediterranean and Indo-European world and reflects similar traditional gender roles. In this context as well, women were restricted to a specific area, which significantly diverged from the space allocated to men (Mazzei, 2009, p. 13).

This research provides insight into the part played by women in Arbëresh cultural heritage through a detailed examination of the key areas where they are most actively involved. Informal education has traditionally been a domain where women have played a crucial role, transmitting language, skills such as craftsmanship, and cultural traditions from one generation to the next. In traditional Arbëresh communities, mainly based in rural settings, women have been instrumental in safeguarding oral heritage, creating traditional garments and fabrics, upholding religious ceremonies, and preparing distinctive local dishes. Women's roles have been shaped through significant life milestones including birth, education, marriage, employment, and their position within the social hierarchy. This research aims to provide insight into the particular functions that women perform in maintaining Arbëresh cultural traditions. What significance do these roles hold in maintaining the continuity of Arbëresh identity?

The study seeks to elucidate the significance of women in Arbëresh customs by addressing these queries, with the goal of safeguarding and disseminating cultural practices, thus enabling the Arbëresh identity to endure through the ages. As educators and custodians of their cultural heritage, women play a pivotal role in establishing a deep link with their ancestral traditions for younger generations, thereby fostering a sense of community and preserving Arbëresh identity for years to come. Their participation in arranging cultural events and keeping traditional skills alive, including textiles and artisanal crafts, ensures a lasting connection to Arbëresh culture, allowing it to blend with contemporary society while retaining its core identity.

This research utilises a qualitative research approach, combining both secondary sources and original data to investigate the part played by women in maintaining Arbëresh identity and cultural legacy. The secondary sources examined consisted of scholarly bibliographies, academic journals, and community-based information, offering a comprehensive base of knowledge on this subject. These sources increase the study's analytical depth and contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the impact women have in preserving Arbëresh cultural customs. The central aspect of this research involved a data collection procedure that entailed conducting 14 interviews with women from Arbëresh communities in Calabria. Interviews were conducted between August and October of 2024 with participants from Arbëresh villages such as Frascineto, Civita, Spezzano Albanese, Cerzeto, Ejanina, San Paolo Albanese, San Giorgio Albanese, and San Benedetto Ullano. The geographical distance between researchers and the Arbëresh community necessitated the use of digital platforms as an efficient means for collecting data. This approach is consistent with the perspectives laid out by Salmons (2014) on the role of technology in qualitative research and the benefits of digital interaction as a means of human collaboration. Interview participants were chosen using the snowball sampling method, in which the initial interviewee acted as a connection to recruit further participants. Twelve online interviews were conducted, in addition to two onsite interviews held in Tirana on 1 October 2024, which enabled direct interaction with certain participants. A self-administered, open-ended questionnaire was employed for data collection, a valuable methodology in qualitative research that

Carter & Little (2007) emphasize, particularly when the target group is geographically scattered. This methodology not only enabled the gathering of detailed and significant data but also provided an introspective environment for the interviewees, thereby fostering active and genuine participation. The analyzed data were examined through an interpretative method, which revealed recurring themes and patterns in participants' comments, ultimately leading to data saturation. This analysis offered a more in-depth understanding of how Arbëresh women perceive and preserve their cultural identity and heritage. This study seeks to redefine the dynamic between participants and researchers, concurrently developing a comprehensive database that will be a valuable resource for researchers wishing to delve deeper into the subject in the future.

2. Arbëresh Women's Cultural Identity: Women's Roles in Community and Cultural Practices

Arbëresh communities in Italy continue to uphold their traditional customs and values, albeit to a lesser extent than they once did. These traditions have undergone a significant transformation over time, ultimately integrating into a distinct process. This integration has consequently impacted their current identity, as stated by Aresta (1988, p. 10). The majority of the women interviewed expressed a robust sense of belonging to the Arbëresh community, highlighting the significance of their identity and cultural heritage. Some people differentiate between their ancestral homeland and the territory where their ancestors actually settled.

Many of them describe their association with Arbëria in this way:

> *"Arbëria is the community of people who speak Arbëresh and, although they arrived in different periods (but not too far apart), they all originate from another land, from a closer eastern homeland. Albania is separated from Arbëria only by a strip of sea, but for me, it is my first homeland! Since childhood, I wondered: 'Why do we, in our home and village, speak a language so different from Italian?' Over time, I found all the answers through studies, research, and participation in conferences." — M.R. from Frascineto.*
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> *"Arbëria is the community of my origins, my people, and that of my paternal ancestors. (My mother was not Arbëresh, but she integrated so well during her adolescence in Mbuzat that she learned the language and traditions perfectly, to the point that very few people knew she was originally from Acri)." — M.M. originally from Frascineto, now living in San Giorgio Albanese.*
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> *"Arbëria is not a nation legally defined like Italy, but it exists through the people who, even without knowing each other, feel this common belonging. Albania, for me, represents a strange kind of nostalgia." — E.E. from Cerzeto.*

When asked which identity they associated more strongly with, Albanian or Italian, an interviewee, M.R. from Frascineto, responded:

> *"I feel like an active part of this land. I am Italo-Albanian, meaning an Arbëresh of Italy. I do not feel Albanian in the sense of being a citizen of present-day Albania, but I acknowledge that our ancestors came from there, from the land of eagles! At the same time, I cannot deny that Italy welcomed us and made us its children. Our ancestors worked with their minds and hands for Italy, never forgetting their origins and identity. That is why our great writers spoke of two homelands: the homeland of origin, which with its language and traditions embedded in our hearts makes us feel Albanian, and the new homeland, Italy, which provided the survivors with shelter, land to cultivate, and, later, the opportunity to study and live a dignified life."*

These reflections underscore the intricacy of Arbëresh identity, with cultural legacy, language, and historical remembrance continuing to mould a distinct sense of belonging, both to their Albanian ancestry and to their Italian homeland. The preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage by women within Arbëresh diaspora communities are closely linked to the complex issue of identity and its evolution between past and present. This process not only guarantees the ongoing existence of culture for generations to come but also enables the adaptation and rejuvenation of customs. Women are instrumental in preserving and advancing this cultural identity,

ensuring the continuation of traditions while fostering cultural diversity through active promotion and social development initiatives.

Arbëresh women have played a significant role in preserving their cultural identity by fostering social cohesion, primarily through the custom of gjitonia, which embodies a spirit of collective unity and mutual support. Historically, a woman's life centred around the gjitonia, a compact urban layout featuring a small square with access to surrounding homes, thereby facilitating the free movement of families within their community. Primarily, the gjitonia served as an expanded household, evolving into a communal space for communication and mutual support among family members (Mazzei, p. 43).

An interviewee, P.F. from Spezzano Albanese, recalls:

"Gjitonia was like one big family."
Another interviewee added:
"Until recently, gjitonia played a significant role. Elderly women would sit on the doorstep of their homes, surrounded by people of all ages, passing on their knowledge through oral tradition. They would discuss everything—true stories, anecdotes, and remedies for both physical and emotional pain. It was, in essence, a living encyclopedia that guided people through life. Then, technology arrived, and almost everything was lost."

Similarly, M.M. reflects on the deep significance of *gjitonia*:

"The gjitonia where I grew up was, and still is, much more than just a neighborhood. It was a close-knit community within the larger village, like an extended family. Everyone took part in it, and when someone faced difficulties, they became collective struggles—everyone worked together to overcome them. But it was also about sharing joy. In gjitonia, you felt protected; you always knew there was someone ready to help at any moment."

In modern times, this previously dominant micro-social structure in Arbëresh villages has largely faded out, giving way to more contemporary family arrangements and the active lifestyles of today's society. Even in Arbëresh villages, the forces of globalization have brought about changes to their traditional lifestyles.

L.M. from Frascineto highlights this transformation:

"Gjitonia was not just about houses being close to each other; it was about sharing ways of living. Unfortunately, with the rise of social media, gjitonia has lost its former value. However, in small villages, the tradition of gathering in communal spaces and sharing stories with one another persist."

These transformations notwithstanding, the legacy of gjitonia still serves as a testament to the robust communal bonds that previously characterised Arbëresh society, a heritage largely safeguarded and transmitted primarily through the role of women.

The impact of women on art, music, and craftsmanship has been utterly indispensable. According to Orjinta (2014, p. 78), women have a natural aptitude to participate in central roles within theatrical performances, handmade crafts, and cultural celebrations. A notable illustration of preserving cultural intangibles through music and artistic expression is provided by women's musical groups within the Arbëresh community. Currently in Calabria, several active women's artistic groups of Arbëresh origin comprise Shpirti Arbëresh (Cerzeto), Kreshnikët e Lirisë (San Benedetto Ullano), Vuxhë Grash (Lungro), and Shqiponjat (Santa Sofia D'Epiro) (Fortunati, pp. 70-73).

In folklore performances, women are pivotal in portraying these events as significant historical, cultural, and ethnic celebrations. In the context of traditional Vallje celebrations in villages like Frasnita, Eianina, and Civita, women and girls adorn themselves in their most elaborate traditional clothing and proceed to march through the village, chanting ancient Arbëresh ballads (Conti & Marquet, p. 161). Community organizations promoting and preserving Arbëresh culture also have women in leadership positions. Organisations stage cultural events, festivals, and educational programmes to preserve and maintain traditional customs.

M.R. from Frascineto shares her experience:

"I am the president of an Arbëresh cultural and folklore association, made up primarily of women. In addition to participating in festivals both in Italy and abroad, particularly in Albania and Kosovo, we also host visitors from all over Italy and beyond through a formal agreement with a tour operator. They come to learn about our ethnicity, and we organize performances for them.
I welcome and introduce them to our history, then continue with the interpretation of traditional songs, explaining the meaning behind each one. Everything is carefully prepared in advance according to a structured script. We sing exclusively in Arbëresh, but thanks to our explanations, the audience can follow along and often even request encores. In the end, they expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to learn about the history of the Arbëresh people, which many had never heard of before!
One of the most beautiful things we often hear from visitors, aside from their compliments, is: 'Of all the journeys we have taken and the Calabrian wonders we have seen, this performance was the most beautiful experience!' Some even tell me directly: 'I could listen to you for hours, hearing all the fascinating stories you share, but unfortunately, we have to continue our trip.'"

Arbëresh women balance preserving their traditional customs with the need to modify them to suit contemporary living. Their culture's ability to adapt enables it to stay contemporary in an increasingly dynamic environment. Historically, women's daily routines centred around tasks such as processing raw materials, managing household duties, creating clothing for their families, and preparing dowries and wedding attire for their daughters. Presently, numerous women are engaged in private sector employment in order to support their families, with cultural preservation practices often undertaken as non-profit endeavours. The production of traditional Arbëresh costumes and embroidery are not economically viable due to the expense associated with these garments. Many women view it as their duty to protect and conserve this culturally significant aspect. The traditional women's attire continues to hold great cultural significance for Arbëresh communities, embodying their distinct identity and heritage.

Arbëresh women have started their own businesses in various fields, including agriculture, with examples being Rosella Stamati from Plataci in grape cultivation and Ana Madeo from San Demetrio in the agri-food industry. Maria Grazia Minisci is widely acknowledged globally as an entrepreneur, as noted by Fortunati (2024, p. 67). In the town of Civita, women hold a vital position within the hospitality industry, overseeing approximately 25-30 bed and breakfast establishments[1] . These women serve as cultural innovators, developing fresh perspectives and approaches that stay true to their heritage while preserving the continuity of Arbëresh culture through generations. Preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Arbëresh women through traditional items such as clothing, art, gastronomy, and culture is crucial for reinforcing Arbëresh identity. Arbëresh women have secured the cultural heritage of the Arbëresh diaspora and have been instrumental in re-establishing and adapting it in their host country through their endeavours.

3. The Role of Women in Language Transmission

Cultural identity is deeply rooted in language, and it plays a vital role in safeguarding a community's core values. Women play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage by passing on norms, customs, and the distinctive traditions of the Arbëresh community through language. According to Conti and Marquet (1988, p. 35), language acts as a unifying element to link generations. A culture and its associated language persist as long as they continue to serve their fundamental purpose: offering a sense of identity and reaffirming a history that is not rejected but consistently confirmed. The ongoing nature of this process hinges on the internal dynamics of the community, specifically those individuals who are actively involved in its development and dissemination. This process of integration began early in the history of the Albanian settlements in Italy.

[1]*Based on the findings of the authors of this article during a five-day study visit in Calabria (Civita, San Benedetto Ullano, Cerzeto, Frascineto and Spezzano Albanese), specifically in Civita, from October 10-13, 2024.*

M.R. from Frascineto reflects on the historical preservation of the Arbëresh language:

> *"The Albanians who arrived in Italy after the death of G.K. Skanderbeg were Christians. The language has remained archaic, as it has been transmitted only orally for more than five centuries! Meanwhile, in Albania, as in all countries, the language has evolved due to the influence of dominant and even transient populations. Albanians of the 15th and 16th centuries preserved the original terms—those they used before leaving—due to their difficult exile from their homeland. Naturally, Italian influences have been present and continue to be. However, until my grandmother's time (19th and 20th centuries), Italian was not widely known. In Arbëresh villages, only Arbëresh was spoken, partly because access to education, where Italian was taught, was a privilege reserved for only a few."*

The linguistic characteristics of Arbëresh dialects including onomastics, phonetic changes, and grammatical variations demonstrate the diverse origins of these communities' migrations (Conti & Marquet, 1988, p. 51). It wasn't until the late 1500s and early 1600s that some settlements started to develop genuine Albanian communities, which preserved their religious traditions, celebrations, practices, and dialect. The linguistic situation remained in a state of instability for an extended period, according to Gambarara (1994, p. 35). The preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity has been largely maintained through women's involvement in passing down language and oral customs within the family unit. Arbëresh communities have largely relied on women to preserve their distinctive linguistic legacy, despite the absence of a standardized Arbëresh language. Villages have developed unique dialectal variations.

As M.P. from the Civita notes:

> *"In my home, we speak Arbëresh according to the dialects of Civita and Ejanina."*

This statement highlights the ongoing diversity and richness of the Arbëresh linguistic heritage, safeguarded by women across generations.

The role of women has been crucial in preserving and passing down the Arbëresh language and culture, acting as primary family teachers. They, as mothers, care for their children, transmit family customs, and teach moral principles (Sani, 2001). Several interviewees stressed the importance and influence of women within the family, frequently mentioning the presence of matriarchal systems. According to Mazzei (p. 51), women in Arbëresh culture have traditionally held a position of cultural matriarchy, a phenomenon also prevalent in many Balkan communities.

This is supported by M.M, who states:

> *"The Arbëresh family was often matriarchal. In my father's family, my grandmother always had the final say in the household."*

Women have cultivated a unique cultural identity by weaving moral values together with religious traditions, and this distinct identity remains influential today. The tradition persists through ongoing references to historical events, whether considered separately or as a group. For centuries, Albanian folklore in Italy, including fairy tales, legends, epic poems, and traditional songs, has portrayed tales of war and resistance against the Ottoman conquerors. These expressions also convey values like patriotism, a desire for liberty, hospitality, and devotion. Mazzei (2009, p. 52) stresses that Arbëresh songs, while referencing warriors battling the Turks, convey long-lasting cultural values including a love for one's homeland, the importance of sacrifice, deep friendships, and unwavering loyalty.

An interviewee shares her thoughts on her connection to Arbëresh songs.

> *"Yes, I speak Arbëresh, just as I have spoken it to my son since his childhood. I know countless songs... it is difficult to share them all here. I can only write a few lines from one (a traditional a cappella song, very old):"*
> *" Një menat ka kisha dolla*
> *Sytë ka rrugullima shllova*

Liveret sbardhjen si bora
Pencka më bëri finjen molla"[2]

Another interviewee, M.M. (originally from Frascineto, now living in San Giorgio Albanese), recalls:

"As a child, I have vivid memories of my paternal grandmother, who spoke almost exclusively in Arbëresh and sang traditional songs like 'Lule Lule', 'Moj e bukura Moree,' and 'Ishë një vashës ndaj loçetë.'"

The Arbëresh language faces substantial difficulties, primarily because of the decrease in the number of fluent speakers among the younger population. The growing prominence of Italian in daily life, education, and media has resulted in many young people using Arbëresh less often, posing a threat to its transmission to future generations in Calabria (for more see Perta, 2014; Cane, 2022). Concerns over the decline are expressed by M.R. from Frascineto.

"Today, young people and children speak only Italian, and those of us who can (and I am one of them) must do everything to prevent this from happening! "One interesting and effective solution would be to introduce Arbëresh as part of the primary school curriculum!"

There is a pressing necessity for institutional backing in integrating Arbëresh language education into school syllabi to guarantee its continuation for future generations.

Specified and translated into Italian from a personal communication with Maria Antonietta Rimoli from Frascineto on 12 December 2024. (English version) Leaving the church on a Sunday morning; I cast my gaze at the rocky ground; the laundry hanging was as white as snow; perhaps my beloved had done the washing.

4. The Contribution of Women to Maintaining Religious Traditions

The Arbëresh have been set apart from the Italians by their language and religious customs, which are distinct cultural features within their environment. The Byzantine Eastern rite has played a crucial role within Arbëresh communities, effectively serving as a defining characteristic of their cultural heritage. Members of these communities regard their religious tradition as a fundamental aspect of their cultural identity whether they are actively practicing or not. Four communities, specifically Frascineto, Santa Sofia d' Epiro, San Costantino Albanese, and San Paolo Albanese, are notable for their uniformity in preserving the Greek-Byzantine rite. The religious life of Arbëresh communities inherently intersects with the culture surrounding them, resulting in a complex reality defined by interrelated religious, cultural, and historical factors (Bellusci, 1993, pp. 5-7). The preservation of religious practices and rituals is closely connected to the Arbëresh identity and is particularly significant for women's contributions to the community. Members of the community are taking an active role in the organisation and coordination of religious events and festivities, ensuring the continued transmission of these traditions to future generations. Their participation is essential in safeguarding religious customs and upholding cultural legacies. A notable illustration of women's participation in religious customs is their part in Java e të Vdekurve[3]. In Arbëresh belief, the souls of the deceased are said to return to visit their loved ones during (Week of the Dead). Families prepare traditional sweets and boiled wheat mixed with sweet spices as an offering to welcome the spirits. Boiled wheat distributed by volunteer women from the local parish is shared among neighbours and provided to congregants in all Greek-Byzantine rite churches at the end of the Liturgia e të Vdekurit

[2]*Translated into Italian from a personal communication with Maria Antonietta Rimoli from Frascineto on 12 December 2024. (English version) Leaving the church on a Sunday morning; I cast my gaze at the rocky ground; the laundry hanging was as white as snow; perhaps my beloved had done the washing.*
[3]*A religious celebration of the Orthodox rite that lasts about a week, known among the Arbëresh as Java e Prigatorvët.*

(Funeral Liturgy) (Rimoli, 2024).

Interviewees in Arbëresh villages frequently associated their happiest childhood memories with religious celebrations.

> *"I have wonderful memories: for example, on the eve of Christmas, while preparing sweets that were fried in large pans over fire and embers, my grandmother and father would start singing Arbëresh hymns in honor of Baby Jesus.*
> *Another memory is that of the evening of Easter Monday when we returned from the Vallje (which at that time took place both on Monday and Tuesday after Easter), and my mother would say to me: "Make sure to carefully fold that linen and that camisole because tomorrow you will wear them again!" (They were not supposed to wrinkle).*
> *The memory of Christmas Eve is linked to food: nine dishes had to be consumed... and at the end of the dinner, my father would take paper and pen and write everything down, even the fruits, both fresh and dried, to ensure that the tradition was respected! Today, unfortunately, a lot of food is wasted because consumerism has replaced the values of the past! "- states M.R. from Frascineto.*

Interviews with arbëresh women have shown a strong link between religious festivals and recollections of childhood, underscoring the pivotal role that customs play in forming a community's sense of self. Family rituals, religious observances, and culinary traditions in the Arbëresh community have been effective ways of passing down cultural heritage to future generations. The disparity between traditions from the past, where food and customs held great significance, and the present's excessive waste and cultural changes poses a pressing requirement for initiatives aimed at preserving cultural heritage. In conclusion, these considerations validate the notion that traditions are more than mere ceremonies—they are fundamental manifestations of one's identity. The ongoing effects of globalization on Arbëresh communities highlight the importance of individual and family dedication to preserving their cultural heritage, which is essential for the long-term survival and continued prosperity of these traditions for generations to come.

5. The Preservation of Culinary Traditions as Cultural Heritage through a focus on Women's Roles

Food plays a significant role in defining the identity of a diaspora and maintaining a strong link to its homeland. Food serves as the initial point of encounter with various cultures (Montanari, 2006, p. 72). For the Arbëresh communities of Calabria, food and its cooking methods are integral to their cultural heritage as defined by Gallo (2019). Culinary traditions offer a way to decipher language that goes beyond the use of words, enabling cross-cultural interactions and illustrating the connections between diverse identities (Teti, 2001). Food and tradition are highly revered, as they embody not only a cultural element, but also an identity indicator that reflects both a sense of belonging to a particular community and the impact of the host culture.

This is confirmed by M.R. from Frascineto, who says:

> *"Arbëresh cuisine still preserves many traditional dishes, although over time it has inevitably been influenced by Calabrian cuisine and other regional Italian culinary traditions. Among the most characteristic recipes are shtridhlët, homemade long strips of pasta that resemble fusilli."*
> *In the past, when bread was baked at home, women would cut a loaf in half and fill it with a fried mixture of potatoes, peppers, eggplants, and eggs, creating a hearty meal for men working in the fields who could not return home for lunch.*
> *Food preservation has always played a crucial role not only in Arbëresh culture but also in traditional agricultural practices. Women would stock their cellars with food supplies to endure the winter—a practice that continues today. One of the most common preparations is homemade tomato sauce, which I still make at home, carefully selecting tomatoes from trusted farmers with whom I have built long-standing relationships. "*

Anthropologist Teti (2001, p. 575) notes that migration causes significant changes in food preferences, primarily in the host country's culture, while also maintaining the original homeland's culinary customs

and flavour profiles. Similar to *Vallja*, the traditional Arbëresh dance, food preparation and its accompanying rituals among the Arbëresh embody a cultural performance and a symbolic representation of their identity. According to Gallo (2019), the narrative of the Arbëresh diaspora's identity is influenced by a spatial structure that resembles a spiral pattern, with food serving as a crucial element in preserving cultural heritage and promoting social unity among its members.

The passing down of traditional recipes and cooking techniques from one generation to the next enables women to assert and protect the Arbëresh identity, especially in today's fast-paced world where such customs are facing the danger of being lost. Well-known Arbëresh dishes include *Dromësat, Shtridhlje, Rrashkatjellet me mish dhie, Kuleçë në val, and Petulla*. The use of Albanian names for these dishes, derived from the Arbëresh dialect, serves to strengthen their cultural and linguistic heritage. Traditionally, women are usually in charge of preparing and preserving Arbëresh dishes, making them not only keepers of culinary traditions but also guardians of this significant part of cultural heritage.

As L.M. from Frascineto noted:

> *"Many traditional dishes are still in use today, especially festive sweets, passed down from generation to generation thanks to the women who learned them from their grandmothers."*

Women preserve their cultural heritage by upholding and teaching Arbëresh culinary customs to younger people, thus securing the continuation of their identity and community bonds throughout the years.

6. The Role of Arbëresh Women in Preserving Cultural Heritage Through Traditional Clothing

Arbëresh women are skilled artisans whose traditional clothing is a significant part of the community's cultural legacy. A common thread running through the clothing of different Calabrian villages is what ties the Arbëresh identity together, while also adding depth to the history and culture of each community. In various points throughout history, traditional attire has contributed to revitalizing Arbëresh identity.

> *"Women's attire has represented an element of pride in our people's history, as it was one of the few cultural markers that survived the looting and humiliation experienced during the darkest moments of Italy's history." (Conti & Marquet, p. 31).*

Women play a significant role in traditional Arbëresh garment creation, encompassing embroidery, textiles, and other artisanal crafts characteristic of the culture. These crafts serve a dual purpose, both as artistic expressions and as essential tools for safeguarding cultural heritage. Francesco Solano notes that minority group costumes often lose their significance rapidly due to their role as social status indicators, signifying a sense of belonging and equality within the community. Language helps keep a person's distinct cultural traits intact, even within a larger society with a dominant culture, whereas clothing can distinguish and sometimes alienate individuals, making it both an indicator of identity and a means of resistance (Ibid, p. 35). Arbëresh customs have relied on traditional dress as their core foundation and continue to do so to preserve their authenticity to this day. The celebration holds a central position in prominent community events including Easter, Vallet e Vëllamjes, which takes place 15 days after Easter, along with numerous other religious holidays and weddings. These events strengthen both individual and group identity, reaffirming the ideological values and ceremonial customs that characterise Arbëresh culture (Buttitta, 2002, p. 9). Throughout their lives, women have been accompanied by traditional clothing, from birth and marriage through to their final rites, representing a complex and long-standing cultural tradition that is often steeped in mysticism (Bolognari, 1988). The traditional dress functions as a visual indicator of Arbëresh identity, maintaining a shared cultural heritage while serving as a symbol of cultural defiance. A significant number of interviewees have a strong connection between their cultural background and the traditional clothing of Arbëresh women, which brings back memories of earlier times. As R.B. from San Benedetto Ullano recalls:

"I remember my great-grandmother wearing her traditional Arbëresh dress in her daily life."

Professor Carmine Stamile stresses the significance of bridal attire, pointing out that it was very costly, however every Arbëresh bride was entitled to wear it on her wedding day, according to Fortino (p. 17). Presently, as Father Antonio Bellusci explains, the traditional everyday dress is no longer worn by women in Frascineto. Prior to the 1950s, ceremonial attire was typically worn to weddings, but currently, it is primarily reserved for Valljet and religious celebrations (Ibid, pp. 88-89). The traditional wedding ceremony has been adapted to the grand setting of the Vallja, a communal ritual that involves the entire community. Traditional-costumed women occupy the main stage. The ritual of Vallja loses its significance without these specific garments, making traditional attire a crucial component in preserving the ethnic and cultural heritage of the Arbëresh (Nini, 2020, p. 29). The preservation and ongoing use of Arbëresh traditional attire are crucial not only for commemorating historical heritage but also for guaranteeing its persistence in contemporary society.

7. The Arbëresh Culture Endures Amidst Globalization

Arbëresh culture, like many others, has undergone natural transformations resulting from interactions with external cultures and the influences of globalisation. A local resident of Spezzano Albanese, A.G., expresses concerns about the future direction of this culture and its associated communities.

"Globalization has somewhat shaken identities. Everyone has tried to become part of this vast hemisphere, losing fragments of their belonging in the process. Only recently has there been an awakened need to understand who we are. However, I fear that rapid cultural changes leave little room for deep reflection on identity. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial to redefine cultural boundaries and find ways for them to co-exist with others."

Similarly, another interviewee M.M. from San Giorgio Albanese emphasizes:

"The traditions of a people's culture are the essence of their identity, which must be preserved and passed on to future generations."

In Calabria, women in Arbëresh communities act as principal custodians of their cultural identity and heritage. They preserve and pass on the rich heritage of the Arbëresh through their daily routines, leadership, and educational methods, thereby sustaining the cultural identity of these communities for generations to come. To strengthen this role, additional initiatives and programs are required, encompassing training for younger people in traditional crafts, the establishment of cultural and family-based economic businesses, and community-led projects.

R.T. from Frascineto emphasized the significance of education in the future of Arbëresh communities.

"Preserving memories, events, traditions, and language is essential to ensuring that cultural identity continues to thrive. Education in schools plays a key role, especially in raising awareness among younger generations and integrating the teaching of the language into primary education. This process not only fosters a sense of belonging but also strengthens a resilient identity and helps safeguard cultural heritage."

Women occupy a vital and indispensable position in safeguarding and passing down Arbëresh cultural legacy. The vast majority of women participating in this study stress the significance of preserving Arbëresh culture for future generations and acknowledge the pivotal position of Arbëresh women in this endeavour.

E.E. from Cerzeto notes:

"Arbëresh culture has not changed during my lifetime. Perhaps now there is greater awareness and cultural pride."

Meanwhile, L.M. from Frascineto warns of the risks posed by institutional neglect:

"I fear that if institutions do not take action, our culture may be destined to disappear, unfortunately."

In this context, A.G. from Spezzano Albanese expresses her sense of responsibility in cultural preservation:

> *"For the role I have played and for what I continue to do today, yes. "I still feel valuable and essential in safeguarding certain customs and keeping alive the desire for research and belonging."*

M.M expresses hope for the future survival of Arbëresh heritage:

> *"I hope our culture will withstand future social changes, just as it has survived for about 500 years. Thanks to those who work to keep the language alive by promoting cultural and social events, our heritage can continue to thrive."*

It is evident from the above that Arbëresh women are pivotal in maintaining and passing down the identity and cultural legacy of their respective communities. Through unwavering dedication and resilience, they persist in overcoming the obstacles presented by globalization and societal shifts, thereby guaranteeing the continued survival of the Arbëresh legacy for generations to come.

8. Conclusions

In summary, this research has underscored the pivotal part Arbëresh women play in safeguarding and passing on cultural legacies within the Calabrian communities. Their input has been essential not only in previous years but continues to be highly engaged in modern times. Their commitment has guaranteed that language, religious practices, customs, and traditional dress remain fundamental to Arbëresh identity, despite the obstacles presented by globalisation and social transformation. A crucial component of this position is the conservation and dissemination of the Arbëresh language, with the majority of this occurring within the family, where mothers and grandmothers have taken on a pivotal part in educating children linguistically. The growing prominence of Italian and the marginalization of Arbëresh in formal education have had a substantial impact on its continuity. Significant linguistic changes are closely linked to broader changes in lifestyle within these communities. Women have also played a crucial role in preserving religious rituals and traditional celebrations, which are fundamental elements of Arbëresh cultural heritage and serve as a platform for reaffirming a sense of shared identity and community.

The traditional clothing of Arbëresh women serves as a significant emblem of their identity and a tribute to the community's rich history spanning several centuries. This traditional attire has largely fallen out of everyday use, yet it continues to be prominently featured in festivals, cultural events, and wedding ceremonies, retaining its symbolic value across generations. Historically, women have played a pivotal role in maintaining and upholding this cultural and identity marker, not only preserving the time-honoured techniques of costume design but also guaranteeing its continued use and enduring cultural importance, as they have for centuries. In a wider perspective, the effects of globalization have brought new difficulties for the preservation of Arbëresh identity, meaning that institutional backing is crucial for protecting this cultural legacy. Strengthening the role of women in this process could be achieved by implementing key strategies such as educating younger generations about Arbëresh culture, enhancing women's participation in cultural heritage projects, and cultivating cultural tourism. The commitment to preserving and passing down Arbëresh culture demonstrates the resilience and ability to persevere of this distinctive cultural community. Ensuring that traditional values and language are not overlooked, they continue to influence the legacy of the Arbëresh people for generations to come.

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Mariaromena Minisci (70, San Giorgio Albanese)
Debora Policastro (39, Frascineto)
Maria Pirrone (47, Civita)
Lucia Martino (70, Frascineto)
Teresa Minisci (64, San Giorgio Albanese)
Caterina Adduci (50, Frascineto)
Laura Pappadà (64, Ejanina)
Caterina de Marco (58, Frascineto)
Elisabeth D'Elia (42, Cerzeto)
P.R (58, San Paolo Albanese, with the requested anonymity)
Rossella Blandi (36, San Bennedetto Ullano)