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## Old and new minorities: the case of Arbëreshë communities and Albanian immigrants in Southern Italy

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### Abstract

The Arbëreshë are an Albanian minority residing in southern Italy. Comparing the previous anthropological literature, this study analyses the Arbëreshë minority and considers three main topics that have contributed to highlighting the differences between Arbëreshë and Italian communities throughout the centuries: the Arbërisht language, ethnic endogamy, and Greek-Byzantine religious Rite. Using ethnographic fieldwork, these three main topics, which outline the Arbëreshë identity, have been examined in a community in the Italian Arbëria, San Costantino Albanese. The aim of the research is to understand changes in Arbëreshë identity resulting from recent social changes due to the modernization process and interactions with recent Albanian immigrants.

**Keywords:** old and new minorities; Arbëreshë communities; Albanian immigrants; identity construction; integration process

### Introduction

On 8 August 1991, the ship *Vlora* sailed from Durrës, Albania carrying approximately 20,000 Albanian immigrants and subsequently docked in the port of Bari on the southeast Italian peninsula. The image of *Vlora* overflowing with immigrants represented much more than a news story; it represented an epochal moment that struck the Italian collective consciousness (Gaeta, 2011). The massive exodus of Albanians, which occurred between March and August 1991, was a first taste of “otherness” for the Italian people, and resulted in a period of reflection on international migration. Italy, which has a long history as a country of emigration, thus had become a country of immigration.

Soon, however, relations between Italians and Albanian migrants approached a breaking point; the shared experience of emigration did not connect the two groups because the Albanians reminded the Italians (especially those from the south) of their own history of migration, which had been caused by endemic poverty. Therefore, the Albanians were perceived as usurpers of jobs and direct competitors in the fragile southern economy. The fear of returning to a state of misery generated significant racism towards Albanians

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which was manifested, particularly during the peak of the immigrants' arrival, by strong prejudices and obvious discrimination (Resta, 1996).

Over time, many Albanian immigrants decided to remain in Italy. Some of them encountered the Arbëreshë minority, descendants of old Albanian immigrants who had left Albania between the late 14<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to settle in several communities in southern Italy due to the Turkish invasion of their homeland. Today, the resident Albanian population in Italy is approximately 490,000 people, making Albanians the second-largest foreign community present in Italy after the Romanians with approximately 1,131,800 residents (ISTAT: 2015).

First examining the history of the Arbëreshë minority in Italy and the troubled relationship between this community and their Italian neighbours, this paper attempts to understand how the recent Albanian immigrants have influenced Arbëreshë identity. First, I analyse the identity of the Arbëreshë minority considering three main topics – the Arbërisht language, endogamy, and Greek-Byzantine religious Rite – which have contributed to highlighting the differences between Italian and Arbëreshë communities throughout history (Resta, 1996). Next, based on these three main topics, I present the results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a small community of the Italian Arbëria, San Costantino Albanese, a village of 805 inhabitants in the south-eastern Basilicata region. The aim of the paper is to understand the changes in Arbëreshë identity resulting from social changes due to the modernization process of the 1970s, internal migration which occurred during the 1960s, and the arrival of Albanian immigrants at the beginning of the 1990s. As a result of the research in San Costantino Albanese and a similar study conducted in a community of Albanian immigrants in Torremaggiore (De Vita & Scionti, 2011), I present the impact of the recent Albanian immigration on the social fabric of the municipalities and, in general, in the construction of the Arbëreshë identity.

### **The Arbëreshë minority in Italy**

The term Arbëreshë refers to the community of Albanian immigrants who have settled in Italy since the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> They, as well as Albanians from contemporary Albania, are the descendants of the Illyrians who originally lived in a vast area of Eastern Europe that stretched from the shores of the Danube River to Greece. In Italy, Arbëreshë communities live scattered throughout seven Italian regions in the imagined nation of Arbëria.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The old name for Albania is Arbëria, which originates from *Arbena*, the plural of *Arbe*, which in turn derives from the Illyrian word *Alb* or *Alp* meaning 'inaccessible summit.' Nowadays, Albania is called *Shqipëria*, which originates from *Shqiponja* which means 'eagle.' This term, referring to a totem, has been widespread since the age of the legendary leader of the Albanian people, Giorgio Castriota Skanderbeg (Çabey, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confounded with the autonomous Principality of Arbanon or Albanon (in Albanian: *Arbëria* or *Arbëria* or in Gheg Albanian: *Arbn* or *Arbnia*), which was the first Albanian State during the Middle Ages.

Many reasons prompted the Arbëreshë to migrate to Italy. According to Arbëreshë mythology, the Arbëreshë abandoned their homeland to escape the Turkish invasion and to protect themselves from Islamization. During the first waves of migration (ca. 1399 A.D.), young Albanian warriors came to Italy to fight alongside the French Anjou against the Aragonese domain.<sup>3</sup>

After the death of Skanderbeg in 1468 and following the increase of the Turkish pressure that led Albania to be a vassal state of the Byzantine government, along with the warriors entire Albanian families came to Italy, including mercenaries, farmers, shepherds, women destined for servitude, and men looking for means that could guarantee them the minimum thresholds of subsistence. Arbëreshë migration can thus be explained as part of a larger migration movements across the whole Balkan region on the threshold of the modern age, when Albanians, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Bosnians were forced to leave their lands because of food scarcities caused by a population increase (Mirizzi, 1993).

Currently, the Arbëreshë minority in Italy amounts to approximately 100,000 people<sup>4</sup> who are spread out among 50 communities in seven regions of southern Italy (Abruzzo, Campania, Molise, Basilicata, Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily). The largest percentage of people who speak Arbërisht live in Basilicata, whereas the majority of Arbëreshë communities (approximately 30) are located in Calabria (Brunetti, 2005). In the area between Calabria and Basilicata, many Arbëreshë communities are located in a large mountainous area which is remote from main communication routes. These communities form a 'flawed nation' in which the Arbëreshë have been able to vigorously preserve their ethnic identity due to isolation from Italian communities (Fabietti, 1995).

The Arbëreshë did not immediately form a uniform group upon arrival in Italy for many reasons: the immigrants came from different places, they spoke several variations of the Albanian language, and they arrived in Italy during different historical periods. What unites the Arbëreshë is the memory of their journey to Italy and a shared collective memory of the events which led to their migration. The Ottoman invasion was the main event that produced the Arbëreshë history and mythology and created an Albanian ethnicity in Italy. Therefore, Arbëreshë collective memory is the history of Albania fixed at the time of departure, orally passed down by the elders, which has been transformed into myth to preserve identity, in which elements of truth and fantasy are mixed. Therefore, customs, traditions, and language have been

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3 According to other sources, the Albanians did not fight exclusively alongside the Spanish Kingdom of Aragon: they provided their military services to both factions (also on the side of the French Anjou). *Le Migrazioni degli Arbëreshë*. (n.d.) (Online) retrieved from: <http://www.arbitalia.it/storia/migrazioni.htm> (25 August 2015).

4 These data are based on the ISTAT 1991 surveys concerning the census of the entire Italian population, which does not provide a corresponding questionnaire designed to survey internal minorities. For this reason, these surveys are insufficient to determine the true numbers of the Arbëreshë minority.

preserved which leads to remembering a past which is as much desired as it is distant (Resta, 1996).

As an 'old' Italian minority, the Arbëreshë are protected by the Italian State by law 482/1999, which recognizes their language and seeks to promote the linguistic and cultural enhancement of the community. Law 482/1999 provides for teaching the minority language in schools and establishing language and minority culture courses in universities. In public offices, the minority language is used for administrative acts. Subsidies are given to publishing and television broadcasters which use the minority language, and dual-language signage is permitted in Arbëreshë villages (Brunetti, 2005: 196).

### **The Arbëreshë identity**

I analysed the identity of the Arbëreshë minority considering three main topics which have contributed to highlighting the differences between the Arbëreshë and Italian communities over time (Resta, 1996).

First, the Arbëreshë language, Arbërisht, which has been transmitted orally from one generation to the next. It retains 40% of words used in Albania before the first migration to Italy beginning in 1399 A.D. The contemporary Arbërisht language was built on this original 40% and has been enriched with words borrowed from other languages.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Arbërisht language originates from the fusion of the two languages spoken in Albania prior to the emigration: Gheg in the mountainous regions of the north and Tosk in the south of the country (Resta, 1996: 35).

The second topic is endogamy, the tendency to marry within the Arbëreshë community, a process which is responsible for the isolation of the ethnic minority. The practice of endogamy within the Arbëreshë group was a way to create a closed ethnic group composed of only people originating from Albania. Through endogamous practices, this group has remained a cohesive and unchanging ensemble for centuries. The ethnic closure which occurred as a consequence of group and village endogamy is responsible for the preservation of the Arbërisht language, the continuation of the traditions and customs, and the preservation of Greek-Byzantine religious Rite. Strict endogamy lasting until the early 1900s is one of the key differences between the Arbëreshë and Albanians. In fact, endogamy is a practice that violates the Kanun of Ducagini, a code of customary laws passed down orally among Albanian rural communities until the 1950s. In contrast to the Arbëreshë, Albanians practiced exogamy; in other words, they married people who did not belong to their own ethnic group. In fact, Albanians were divided into tribes (*Fis*) whose members considered themselves to be brothers and sisters, and marriage within the same tribe was forbidden. Therefore, members belonging to one *Fis* married

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<sup>5</sup> Some examples of this can be seen in the word *Adet* (use) or (custom), which was borrowed from Turkish, and *Gitonja* (court or neighbourhood), from Greek. Additionally, some words were derived from Italian and southern Italian dialects, such as *ndine* (television antenna).

members of other tribes to create alliances with nearby communities, thereby transforming enemies into relatives (Resta, 1991: 71).

Finally, Greek-Byzantine religious Rite, an integral part of Catholicism, has perpetuated the Arbërisht language (Bolognari, 2001: 80). The Arbëreshë belong to the Italo-Albanian Catholic Church, one of the 22 Eastern Catholic Churches which, together with the Latin Church, compose the Catholic Church. It is a particular church that is autonomous (*sui juris*), in communion with the Pope of Rome. This church employs Greek-Byzantine religious Rite which adheres to ritual and spiritual traditions common to most of the Orthodox Church. The Rite is characterized by some particular elements: the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in Greek, Arbërisht, or Italian; the ability of the priest, the *Papàs*, to marry; the administration of the sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) in a single moment; and the celebration of the marriage sacrament according to a particular ritual that is exclusively Arbëreshë. As in Orthodox Christianity, the churches are oriented to the East, and icons from the Greek *Eikonos* (similarity) replace statues of the saints. The churches have an iconostasis, a wall that separates the altar from the central aisle (Bolognari, 2001: 79).

The presence of Greek-Byzantine Rite among the Arbëreshë is related to historical events which affected Albania during the advent of Christianity in Albania. In 1054 A.D., with the schism that divided the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church, there were two established areas of influence in Albania. One area was in the south, where Tosk was spoken, and Constantinople's Church, Orthodox Christianity, and Byzantine Rite were present and practised. The other area was in the north, where Gheg was spoken, and the populace was faithful to the Pope of Rome, Catholicism, and Latin Rite (Resta, 1996: 40).

Therefore, for the Arbëreshë who arrived in Italy from different parts of Albania, the only point of contact was the national hero Giorgio Castriota Skanderbeg who was called *Athleta Christi* (the Champion of Christ) by Pope Callixtus III on 23 December 1457 because he fought alongside the Papacy to defend Christianity from the Ottoman invasion. His personhood was used to highlight the arrival of Arbëreshë ancestors in Italy and their faith in the Catholic Church, in contrast to their peers in Albania who had been Islamized. Therefore, once they arrived in Italy, in an effort to unite into a single community, the Arbëreshë did not fully embrace the orthodoxy of the tribes of the south and introduced a rite which differed from those professed by the Catholic tribes of the north (Resta, 1996).

### **Research in San Costantino Albanese**

In a small community in Arbëria, San Costantino Albanese, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork<sup>6</sup> in which I studied the three main topics presented

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<sup>6</sup> The research is the result of fieldwork conducted in the small community of San Costantino Albanese between August and October 2011. Qualitative research, via standardized open-ended

above – language, endogamy, and Greek-Byzantine religious Rite – which constitute the Arbëreshë identity. The village was founded in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century after Albanian refugees moved from the town of Corone (in modern-day Greece) to the southeast of Basilicata.

In San Costantino Albanese, the entire community knows both Arbërisht and Italian and recognizes both languages as means of communication within the community even though both languages are used in different contexts.

The elders and adults of the village live in a situation of diglossia, a phenomenon which occurs in a community that uses two or more languages which each have individually specific functions that are not interchangeable. Diglossia has developed because the two languages have been learned in different times and in different ways (Bolognari & Fileni, 1976). The elderly have learned Arbërisht since birth; it was orally transmitted and spoken in a familial context. In contrast, until the early 1980s, only Italian was learned at school, and it was completely forbidden to speak Arbërisht in a school setting (Bolognari & Fileni, 1976: 17).

In contrast to the elderly and adults, Arbëreshë youth are bilingual; they have learned both languages equally since they were children. Unlike the adults, they are able to write in Arbërisht because they have learned the language at school through extracurricular courses (launched following the approval of Law 482/1999) which taught Arbërisht as a foreign language. Young people, however, speak Arbërisht only with their families, and Italian is used for all other communication. Therefore, a progressive decline of the Arbërisht language has occurred due to Italian literacy being emphasized at school, and the media's exclusive use of Italian.

Nowadays, because the entire Arbëreshë community lives in a situation of diglossia and bilingualism, Italian is considered the 'high' language – it is dominant and is used in business and politics. The Arbërisht language is considered 'low' – it is subordinate and is used only within families (Bolognari & Fileni, 1976: 29).

The practice of ethnic and village endogamy in San Costantino Albanese was completely abandoned beginning in the latter half of the 1950s. In this period, the village began to accept modernization processes which enabled better connections with the nearby 'Latin'<sup>7</sup> villages of San Giorgio Lucano, Noepoli, Terranova del Pollino, and Cersosimo. These processes included, for example, the construction of a transportation network. Simultaneously, the

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interviews, involved nine of the inhabitants of San Costantino Albanese. The interview questions were processed differently for adults in the village (called the 'first generation') and for youth (the 'second generation'). In addition, we decided to interview traditional 'key informants' such as the teacher, the priest, the tour guide at the ethnographic museum, and the operator of the linguistic helpdesk. Other important informants were the elderly of the community, whose testimonies were crucial in reconstructing a century of the village's history.

<sup>7</sup> The term "Latin" defines all those people who are not Arbëreshë and who have embraced the Latin/Roman religious Rite.

village was involved in the phenomenon of emigration that led to many people from Italy's southern communities moving to northern Italy, Europe, or the Americas to find work. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of endogamy remained popular and due to ethnic isolation a high level of reproductive isolation occurred.

The relinquishment of endogamy led the Arbëreshë to increasingly assimilate themselves to Italian culture. At the same time, however, mixed marriages have brought together two cultural worlds that had always been perceived as opposed (Resta, 1991).

San Costantino Albanese and the nearby community of San Paolo Albanese are the only Arbëreshë villages in the Basilicata region where Catholics adhere to Greek-Byzantine religious Rite. The Rite forms an expression of alterity or otherness which is immediately evident. This otherness is particularly perceived by the community of San Costantino Albanese where it is claimed to be an essential element of Arbëreshë tradition, much like the language, and is perpetuated via religious celebrations conducted in Arbërisht.

The Greek-Byzantine Rite has increased the differences between the Italian and Arbëreshë identities, representing a symbol of a manifest diversity because it has been a significant element of difference and identification for all Arbëreshë communities throughout the centuries. As Bolognari (2001) stated, 'the church is not only a place of worship but also a metaphor for the society and its diversity' (p. 80).

In general, in San Costantino Albanese, the majority of the population are Christian Catholic devotees and observers of Greek-Byzantine Rite. Even so, as 'Latin' people, citizen participation in liturgical celebrations is low and is mainly concentrated among the elderly. Adults and young people rarely participate in liturgical celebrations due to a lack of time or interest. Instead, these individuals participate in special religious events (Christmas, Easter, weddings) and the celebrations in honour of patron saints (the Madonna della Stella and San Costantino Il Grande) because such celebrations represent moments in which the entire community comes together.

### **The Arbëreshë and Albanian immigrants**

Ethnic identity is a uniting element for the Arbëreshë group. However, at the same time, ethnic identity is a denial or a rejection of other ethnic groups because it is the result of one's relationship with and subsequent differentiation from others (Harrison, 1979: 39). Indeed, the Arbëreshë have long differentiated themselves as much as possible from their Italian neighbours. At the same time, they have pursued a myth of brotherhood with the Albanian people having, throughout the centuries, considered themselves to be linked to their Albanian counterparts. However, the Albanians formed a nation with their own territory, language and national identity. Their nation, Albania, continued to live independently from its Arbëreshë kinfolk and followed its own historical course.



Immediately after the Second World War, the Socialist Republic was established in Albania, guided by Enver Hoxha who remained in control between 1944 and 1985. Throughout this period, the Republic fell under the influence of varying political currents in different periods: Tito until 1948; the Soviet Union until 1960; and Chinese influence until 1975. During the fifty years of dictatorship of Hoxha, Albania was characterized by international isolation, autocracy, and forced secularization. Under conditions of widespread poverty, growing unemployment, and lack of real prospects for the future, emigration seemed the only way forward. These elements led to a strong desire for many Albanians to leave their homeland which then began in the months of February-March 1991. In those months, thousands of people boarded makeshift boats and headed for the Italian coast of Apulia. Thousands of Albanian immigrants thus migrated to Italy (Resta, 1996).

In 1991, when Albanians arrived in the Arbëreshë territory in Italy and longed for the same resources that the Arbëreshë had, the Arbëreshë revised their perception of their Albanian brothers and their feelings concerning ethnic identity began to change. The first landings were accepted positively by the Arbëreshë, who had always seen the Albanians as brothers who were linked by an indissoluble blood bond (*Vellamja*) because they were responsible for the dissolution of the socialist dictatorship and were the restorers of democracy and freedom of worship (Resta, 1996: 85). Later, after a large inflow of Albanians into Italy and the Italian State's subsequent placement of some of these Albanians in Arbëreshë villages, the perception of the 'Albanian brothers' changed. Forced cohabitation generated strong Arbëreshë resentment of the Albanians for two basic reasons:

The birth of a conflict within the ethnic Arbëreshë identity due to the appearance of their historical (Albanian) ancestors which made the Arbëreshë aware of the deep-seated differences between themselves and the inhabitants of their homeland. With the arrival of the Albanians, the Arbëreshë lost the privilege of being Albanians in Italy, and they discovered themselves to be Arbëreshë, whose ethnic identity was built when they left their homeland and immigrated to Italy more than 500 years ago (Resta, 1996).

The emergence of a struggle that developed in Arbëreshë villages which was characterized by a particularly depressed economy: The Albanians were viewed as cheap labour and competitors for scarce economic resources (Resta, 1996).

Because of the small number of Albanian immigrants, there was no significant conflict in San Costantino Albanese. However, in this area a clear distinction remained between the two ethnic groups. The first generation of Albanian immigrants to San Costantino Albanese was initially accepted with suspicion but later became quite well integrated into the village. These individuals learned Arbërisht before Italian. The children, the second generation, exhibit a strong attachment to the village, speak the language, and know the community's customs and traditions. However, at the same time, the



children affirm their belonging to Albania, the land of their affection and their relatives.

The attitude of the elderly Arbëreshë towards the Albanians is quite contradictory; some show openness and hospitality 'because Albanians speak our language',<sup>8</sup> whereas some show deep resentment due to the breach of hospitality (*Besa*) and village rules.

In more general terms, the arrival of Albanian immigrants provoked different reactions in the Arbëreshë communities of southern Italy. In some Arbëreshë communities in Calabria, where the Arbëreshë believed that 'some Albanians stole and raped',<sup>9</sup> there was a move away from the Albanian identity; being Albanian (and thus Arbëreshë) became a reason to feel shame.

After the Albanians arrived in Italy, the Arbëreshë gained access to a number of identities which were useful for defining themselves: they could be identified as European, southern Italian, Arbëreshë or simply Albanian. But although they shared a common origin with the Albanians of recent immigration, they never adopted the Albanian identity, redefining themselves instead as either Arbëreshë or Italian. Though it is possible to find commonalities in language and origin among the Arbëreshë and Albanians, there is a lack of continuity in ways of thinking and making history that allows them to trace a common bond.

Time is a crucial variable in these two stories of immigration in Italy because the time frame between the two events is more than 500 years. Furthermore, other variables should not be overlooked: the motivations behind the migration, the expectations of emigration, and the process of integration in Italy (De Vita & Scionti, 2006: 140).

According to research conducted in Torremaggiore<sup>10</sup> in 2006 by Resta and Scionti, the common past did not contribute to the integration and the establishment of Albanian immigrants in Italy. Instead, living according to common village rules put Italians and Albanians in contact. The Arbëreshë prejudices towards Albanian immigrants concerned the immigrants' behaviour rather than their origin. Therefore, the Arbëreshë and the Italians both found it easier to receive immigrants who, once they arrived in Italy, exhibited a real desire to build their futures as ordinary, hard-working immigrant families. Instead, the young Albanian immigrants were not perceived as good people because they were primarily male, unmarried, and unemployed. Young Albanians were seen by the community as delinquents instigating fights, drunk in the central square, and as harassing the village woman – even though they did not behave much differently from their Torremaggiore peers.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Antonietta B. from the community of San Costantino Albanese, on 06/10/2011.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Anna D.C., employee of San Costantino Albanese linguistic helpdesk, on 06/10/2011.

<sup>10</sup> Torremaggiore is a small village in the Apulia Region with a large community of recent Albanian immigrants. This village is part of a district that is characterized by the presence of two Arbëreshë villages: Casalvecchio di Puglia and Chieuti.

Therefore, despite having the same territorial origin and a similar language, elements that might provide a sense of continuity between the old and new waves of migration, there was little successful interaction between the two communities. New immigrants considered the Arbëreshë to be Italians who in the past were Albanians. The Arbëreshë, on the other hand, did not exhibit any particular favour towards the recent Albanian migration.

For the Arbëreshë, the encounter/clash with the Albanians helped to definitively cut the umbilical cord with their homeland, which was considered to be too distant both culturally and socially. For the Albanian immigrants, Italy was seen as a country of immigration due to the first arrivals of Albanians in the early 1990s. Resulting from this, the Italian government organized, for the first time, policy interventions aimed at ‘integrating’ immigrants. Nowadays the process of integrating Albanians is ongoing, and it is conceivable that there may be future interactions between the two ethnic groups.

### Conclusion

The present findings are not definitive since they represent only a limited view of the Arbëreshë’s variegated reality. Contrary to what one might imagine, the Arbëreshë have not facilitated the process of integration of Albanian immigrants in Italy. Networks of solidarity to facilitate the employment of immigrants in the new Italian reality have developed within the community of new immigrants, without input from the Arbëreshë (De Vita & Scionti, 2006). On the other hand, the Arbëreshë minority is in fact disappearing, and the feared process of assimilation into Italian culture is occurring through Italian being the language used in schools, the media providing coverage exclusively in Italian, and economic imperatives which have led to population transfers towards urban hubs.

The relationships between the three ethnic groups present in Arbëria, the Arbëreshë, the Albanians, and the Italians, prove to be complex. Processes of assimilation and differentiation continue to occur as the Arbëreshë interact with both the Albanian and Italian counterparts.

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