Mary Pecoraro Cawthon: Ethnic Identity and Language

The Case of the Italo-Albanians

Essay by Mary Pecoraro Cawthon

When I am asked about my ethnic background, if the person really seems to care, I say that I have an Italian name and that my parents were both from Sicily, but that we always spoke Albanian and think of ourselves as Arberesh or Italo-Albanians. In September I attended a picnic in Sacramento, California billed as the annual Arberesh picnic. The people there, about 200 of them, were old friends from my Madison, Wisconsin neighborhood, Arberesh from Sacramento, San Jose, a group from Fresno whose parents had emigrated from Maschito in Lucania in Southern Italy to California, and some Calabrese. There were also some immigrants from Albania as well as children or grandchildren of those immigrants. What we had in common was the language we spoke – Albanian, or Arberisht, which is an old dialect of Albania and which I had learned as my first language.

The Albanians of Italy are the largest linguistic minority in that country. It is estimated that between 92,000 and 100,000 people speak that language as their first language. Of the original villages that were established about 40 communities survive in Calabria, Basilicata, and Puglia and three villages in Sicily, where there were ten colonies originally. Of all the surviving villages Piana degli Albanesi in Sicily is the one that most fiercely guards its ethnic identity in language, religion, and culture. It is called "Hora e Arbereshvet – the home (patria) of the Arberesh." This is the town from which my father emigrated in 1912 to Madison. Wisconsin. He went back in 1921 after serving in the American army in World War I to choose a bride, my mother. I was born a year later. The language we spoke at home and my first language was Albanian.

Piana degli Albanesi, originally called Piana dei Greci, was founded in 1486. It will celebrate its 500th year in 1988 in May. The people of the colony were from southern Albania called Toskeria or Epiro and were Greek Orthodox, hence the name Greci. (It was changed to Albanesi in 1939 by Mussolini when he invaded Albania). The original settlers were fleeing the Turkish invasion of their country. They were given refuge by Ferdinand I, King of Naples and Sicily. The Archbishop of Palermo, Barone, assigned to them a large plain that lies about 3,000feet above Palermo and is surrounded by high mountains.

The family names of the refugees are still important names in Piana: Cuccia, Matranga, Schiro, Stassi, Barbato, and others that have become Italian names. These names were also the names of the families in Madison.

There are eight churches in Piana, seven of them with the Byzantine-rite. Their priests wear the black dress and toque of the Greek church and they are allowed to marry and have families. Albanian is still the first language of the home in Piana although Italian is the official language of the schools and the government, as it is for two other Sicilian communities, Contessa Entellina and Santa Cristina Gela. The language has been lost in the settlements of Palazzo Adriano, Mezzojuso, Biancavilla (originally Albavilla), San Michele di Ganzeria, and S. Angelo di Muxaro (Agrigento).

The migration of Albanians to Italy took place between the years 1448 and 1543. When Alphonse I of Spain was King of Naples he appealed for help from the Albanian leader Scanderbeg to put down an uprising near Crotone in Southern Italy. Scanderbeg sent Demetrio Reres and his two sons with an army. After suppressing the revolt the Albanians asked to stay because of the troubles with the Turks in Albania. They settled in twelve villages and later went to Sicily where they founded four villages.

Scanderbeg, as George Castriota was known, is Albania‘s national hero. (Every Albanian town has as its main street the name of Giorgio Castriota.) It was under his leadership that the Albanians battled against the Turks when the Turks were conquering the whole Balkan peninsula. Scanderbeg's father John, who was ruler of Albania, had been forced to send his four

sons to Istanbul where they were trained in the Corps of the Janissaries. George alone survived and became one of the Sultan's favorite generals. He was given the title "Bey" and since he was called Iskander in Turkey he became "Scanderbeg." It was his friendship with the King of Naples that led to the migrations to Italy. Later, when Ferdinand of Aragon became King of Naples and Sicily, he also received aid from Albanian troops to put down revolts in Italy and Sicily. He also permitted settlements by Albanian refugees.

Another reason for granting lands to Albanians was that constant war had depopulated whole regions. Plague and disease had also decimated the peasant population and workers were needed to till the land of the vast holdings. Contessa Entellina in Sicily bears the name of the person who asked and received peasants to occupy her estate.

Scanderbeg died in 1468 and more Albanians fled to Italy and Sicily, some to join those already there and others to settle in new colonies. Scanderbeg's last words were faithfully recorded: "My faithful warriors, the Turk will conquer our country and you will become his slaves... bring my son, that beautiful son of mine, so that I may warn him… Abandoned flower, flower of my love, take your mother and prepare three galleys, the best ones you have, lest the Turk know about it and come and take possession of you... Go to the beach. There you will find a shady, sad cypress. Tie my horse to it and on my horse unfurl to the winds my flag and on my flag hang my sword. Turkish blood lies on its cutting edge. There death sleeps. The arms of the frightful warrior will stop mute under the tree. When the bora (snow) will blow, the horse will neigh, the flag will turn here and there and the sword will jingle. The Turk will hear and sad and trembling will turn back."

The Turk did not turn back but conquered Albania and made it a Muslim state. History says that the toughest group, among the last to leave, went to Sicily from Himara and Chamaria in 1485. They landed at Solunto but were refused refuge because of fear of retaliation from the Turks. They found their way to northwest Sicily and the Monreale Diocese where they were given permission to settle on the plain now called Piana degli Albanesi.

These are the Arberesh of Hora who still struggle for cultural survival. Awareness of their heritage is growing stronger. At Easter time and April 23, St. George's Day, special celebrations take place. The old rich costumes of Albania are worn by the young women who take part in the processions. Classes are held after regular school so that children can learn to read and write their native language. Young writers publish a monthly magazine, *Mondo Albanese*, written mostly in Albanian. In Calabria there is a publication *Katundi Yne* (*Paese Nostro*). There have been cultural exchanges with Albania. There are Albanian studies in the departments of literature at the universities of Rome, Palermo, Padova, Napoli, and Bari, with the largest group of students at the University of Palermo.

The Sicilians consider these people "difficult and contentious." They have had to defend themselves against the surrounding communities with cunning and force. From being mercenaries in the 15th and l6th century, they became revolutionaries in the 19th century during Italy's struggle against the kings of Naples and Sicily.

In the years after settling in Sicily the local landlords and the Catholic Church whittled away at the privileges which they had originally given the Albanian settlers. After the abolition of feudalism their land grants were taken from them. They were reduced to abject poverty. The fact that they maintained their own Byzantine religion and ethnic cohesion aggravated matters. Latin-rite bishops replaced Byzantine-rite priests with Latin-rite priests upon the death of an Albanian priest. While the papacy paid lip service to the notion of equality between the rites, the hierarchy remained hostile to the Albanians.

When the struggle for unification began in Italy the Arberesh were ready to fight. Trevelyan, an English historian of Italy, described Piana as "the hearth of freedom in Western Sicily." Arberesh revolutionaries had already been in touch with Garibaldi before he arrived in Sicily. Francesco Crispi, an Arberesh leader, went to Genova to confer with Garibaldi. When Garibaldi landed in Western Sicily at Marsala the fighting had already begun. In April an uprising against the Bourbon king had already broken out in Palermo. The Arberesh of Hora were the hard core of the forces and they had begun guerilla actions against the army in the countryside.

Two Italian revolutionaries from Garibaldi's group went to Sicily to meet with the revolutionary committee from Hora. One of them, Corrao, has described this visit: "Then we headed towards Hora which had become one of the most active centres of the revolution. The Bourbon police surrounded Hora in an attempt to capture us, but the Arbereshi protected us and organized our escape. The police arrested the Arberesh women, Katerina Musakia, the wife of the chairman of the committee, Peta, Gioachina Kosara, Concetta Benicci, and others. The Arberesh girl Giovanna Peta from Hora of the Arbereshi brought the Italian national flag to Palermo hidden in her clothes."

Garibaldi himself stopped to rest in Hora on his way to Palermo; there he was received with cheers. The Arberesh from other villages had joined in the struggle and along with four thousand Sicilian volunteers defeated the Bourbon forces in hand-to-hand combat at Calatafini. In his memoirs Garibaldi wrote: "We spent the rest of the day in Hora in order to march more freely towards Palermo." About his march to Palermo: "In no part of the world, other than Sicily, would a march like that from Hora to Marino, from Marino to Misimeri have been possible."

From Albania, a woman writer of the day, Dora D'lstria wrote: "The small town of Hora, the biggest center inhabited by the Arberesh of Sicily, occupied an important place in the uprising."

The unification of Italy did not remedy any of the ills of the latifundi system there. By the 1890s the population of Hora was composed mainly of landless laborers and poverty-stricken tenants. In 1890 sharecroppers and day laborers joined together in the Fascio movement of Italy. This was a movement to teach the poor how to organize to get control of their own lives and acquire land for their own livelihood. Locally politics was dominated by the middle class so the Fascio group organized to fight for control of the municipality.

The Fascio movement was brought to Hora by a native son, a medical man in his 30s, Dr. Nicola Barbato. In April of 1893 he recruited virtually all of the adult population men and women, except for the wealthy, for the Fascio movement. The police estimated the membership at 2,300, more than twice as many as that of any Fascio outside of Palermo. The women of Hora were particularly active in the movement and entered the Fascio with great enthusiasm.

The movement taught them the hard-headed politics of organization and elections. Several Socialist candidates won municipal office in Hora. The whole local council and the deputy to the parliament became socialist before World War I and communist subsequently. The present mayor Andrea Cuccia is a communist. Party headquarters are in the piazza in Hora next to Shen Meria, the Byzantine church of the Madonna of Odgiditria, whose icon was brought to Hora from Albania.

Ever since the Fascio, the Arberesh of Hora have retained their triple loyalty – to communism, to the Albanians of the homeland, and to Greek Christianity. Since May 1893, every May Day the Arberesh of Hora have gone to a remote mountain pass, the Portella della Ginestra, to hold the May Day meeting. The speeches are delivered from Dr. Barbato's stone, a rock slab where he had stood to address them. May 1, 1947, the Mafia hired the bandit Giuliano to shoot down participants. Fourteen people were killed, causing a national political scandal. The

surviving members of his band were finally convicted in 1956 for the massacre, he having been assassinated in turn by the Mafia. In Hora, the Mafiosi have been less powerful than elsewhere in the province since the Fascio movement of the 1890s.

Because of geography (steep mountain terrain), religion, culture, and politics, the Arberesh of Hora were isolated. Their xenophobia isolated them from their Sicilian neighbors who always looked upon them with suspicion. Sicilians were called "Liti" – the expression being contemptuous. They did business with them – fish peddlers, produce peddlers, those selling household goods went to Hora from Palermo, sixteen miles away. Intermarriage with Sicilians was discouraged. In Hora there was a saying "Vajza jime, gjegjem ti, mirr Arberesh e jo Liti, se te chan Shpi edhe kusi" (my dear daughter, listen to me, marry Arberesh and not "Liti" because he will break (bring down) your house and your pots").

This sense of "we" against "them" persisted in the Sicilian neighborhood in Madison where I grew up. Actually, we were an Arberesh community within the larger Sicilian community. There were about 65 Arberesh families in Madison in the 1920s, 30s, and early 40s when I lived there. The first Arberesh went to Madison in 1905 from Piana. Many of the rest who followed from there were related to the first of the families. These were the Maisano, Cuccia, Parisi, Paratore, Barbato, and Licali families. The first ones worked for the railroad, the Reynolds Tobacco Company, or started a business. Later the arrivals worked mostly in construction, almost all of them for John Icke, a former city engineer turned private construction owner. When I was a child I thought this man's name was all one word – "Joniki."

In 1912, the year my father arrived from Piana to live with his cousins the Paratores, the Arberesh formed a mutual aid society "I Lavatori d'ltalia di Mutuo Soccorso e Beneficenza," always referred to as "la societa" by all of us. They built a club house for meetings and for social things such as playing cards, boccie, but mostly for talking politics. In the tradition of their home, Hora, most of the members were socialists and anti-clerical, meaning the Catholic Church. Until 1948 the meetings were conducted in Albanian and one of the by-laws that lasted until the end of World War II was that membership was limited to Arberesh, their offspring, or someone married to an Arberesh woman.

Of the 65 families in Madison only 15 or 16 families attended the Catholic Church, St. Joseph's, which had an Italian-speaking priest. When I say family, I mean the women and children went, the men only for weddings, baptisms, funerals, maybe. The rest of the Arberesh did not attend any church, went to the Italian Methodist Mission Church, or sent their children there. A few families in the early years had their children baptized at Grace Episcopal Church, but never attended services there.

When my father was a bachelor, he and some friends went to Sunday School and English classes at the Italian Methodist Mission. The classes were all taught by young American women and there were also picnics and parties at the church. After he married my mother he did not go to church. My mother and all the children in our family went to St. Joseph's. I was baptized when I was ten days old. When my next two siblings were born, two girls, my father did not want them baptized because he said he wanted to see if they would turn out better or worse without baptism. My mother finally walked them over to the church one working day when my sisters were three and four years old. They were baptized by special arrangement and the first Papa knew about it was when he arrived home from work and found the godparents at our house for dinner. The next two children were baptized as infants despite his objections.

We went to church and catechism, but on Sundays we had to listen to Papa's sermon as well as the priest's. I went one year to the parochial school. St. Joseph's, but only in the first grade.

My father did not permit me to attend because a "Liti" threw a tin can at me one day and wounded me over the eye. He called the "Liti" animals or worse. When my youngest sister, Nina, was five she went to school at St. Joseph's and stayed through the fifth grade. She was the only Arberesh pupil at the school.

I also remember that once when one of the members of "la societa" died and was buried as a Catholic (because of his wife's wishes) the men accompanied the body on foot just to the door of the church and then waited outside and smoked until the Mass was over.

This distrust for the clergy and for "real Sicilians" seems to have been true only in Madison. Arberesh in other communities were Roman Catholic and socialized with other Italians in their communities. When I asked my mother why so many of the families in Madison went to the Methodist Mission and the men did not go to church at all, she said it was "because the men were all socialists and sat around talking politics all the time." An older cousin of mine had a different idea. She thought it was because at the time "they were all morti di fame" and had become "rice Christians." The Methodists gave away food and clothing during the Depression and the young ones at Sunday School got candy and cookies.

There was little inter-marriage between the Arberesh and Sicilians. We were not allowed to play with the young people and neither were my friends. We went to Draper School, they went to Longfellow. There were no social events at church that we could attend because we were not allowed to go to CYO dances. Some of the Arberesh went to Central High where they became friendly with "Liti" students. One of my friends says that when her cousin married a "Liti" the girl's mother said she could never hold her head up among the Arberesh because this had taken place. But then she couldn't refuse because the young man's father was influential in the Sicilian community and the mother was a widow. He was the local "capo" for the Mafia.

Although the Arberesh kept themselves apart from the Sicilians when it came to non-Italians it was a different story. I was allowed to have American friends and to go to their homes. The young men went to dances in nearby small towns where there were German and Scandinavian communities. Many of them married girls from these towns. Arberesh girls were not allowed to date but when we finally left home most of us married non-Italians. Nick Stassi of Madison who is the unofficial historian for the Italian community says he has kept track of most of us and that 95 percent of the Arberesh married non-Italians.

Several Arberesh women were the first to go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison and two to teachers colleges in the 1930s. Before that Arberesh women worked as housekeepers in hospitals, in restaurants. Several had worked at the tobacco warehouse when it was in existence. They were more independent and had more spirit than the Sicilian women. True, the university was only five blocks away from home which was an incentive, but it was also close by for the Sicilians. I think the Arberesh pushed education more, even for girls. Both my father and mother urged us to be educated and take advantage of every opportunity to better ourselves.

The Arberesh because of their political background in Hora took to American ideas and ideals more easily than the Sicilians of the community. They also seemed to learn good, accent-free English.

The (Albanian) language was learned at home from the mother. Children of mixed marriages did not learn Albanian if the mother did not speak it. Consequently, the language among American Arberesh is dying out. But those with Arberesh backgrounds seem to know that they are not like other Italians. We always seek each other out and are always thrilled to meet some one of the same blood. We are always, greeted with the cry that we are "gjaku i shprishur," literally, "blood that has been dispersed or scattered." This from Moslems from Albania, Roman

Catholics from Yugoslavia, or someone from the orthodox community of Albanians from Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Albanians from Shqiperia (present day Albania) especially admire the Arberesh for keeping alive for 500 years the language of their homeland and especially the passion for independence for their old home even though they knew they could never return. The Arberesh admire the Albanians because in spite of 500 years of domination by the Turks they were able to emerge and soar like eagles for which Shqiperia is named. Shqiperia means “land of the eagles.”