

## Learning Arvanitic in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Greece: Linguistic Maintenance and Cultural Idiosyncrasies in Greece's Arvanitic Speaking Communities

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### Historical Origins

Most historians agree that the Arvanites first settled central and southern Greece in the thirteenth century. A succession of migrations into Greece continued until the early nineteenth century. The Arvanites are thought to have originated from parts of present day Albania. Their identity has been linked to their Arvanitic (*Arvanitika*) or *Tosk* Albanian language and their practice of Greek Orthodox Christianity.

One of the earliest accounts to mention the Arvanites is from Anna Comnena (1083–1153 ACE) in the twelfth century, where she briefly describes a town and people from Durrës in present day Albania called *Arbanus* (SEWTER 2009). It is here, that contemporary historians believe the name *Arvanite* or *Αρβανίτες* originated. Later Byzantine accounts describe them as Christians who settled in parts of present day southern Albania and northwestern Greece. It is also said that they were encouraged by Byzantine officials to migrate south in undeveloped and under-populated areas of Central Greece and the Peloponnese where many of these communities still live today.

Historians and anthropologists continue to debate the Arvanites geographic and ethnic origins. Some have characterized them as a “hybrid” Greek/Albanian culture since they speak both Greek and Albanian while others mostly nationalists in both Greece and Albanian have claimed them to be purely Greek or purely Albanian.

For nearly 900 years Arvanite towns were scattered around Athens in Attica, Central Greece, Southern Euboea, Corinth, the Argolis, western Laconia and many of the Soronic and Cycladic Islands in the Aegean. For some time the Arvanites was Greece's biggest public secret in that the Greek state had always been aware of them, but reluctant to acknowledge that the language they spoke was not Greek (MAGLIVERAS 2009).

After the creation of the modern Greek state in 1827 the Arvanites identified as being almost exclusively Greek or Greek Orthodox Christians, but preferred to speak Arvanitic instead of Greek. The Greek state had also seen them this way, mainly because they had participated the Greek Revolution and had been active in the political and cultural life of Greece.

At the same time, the Arvanites remained mysterious and many Greeks assumed that the Arvanitic language was ancient northern Greek dialect. But when Albanian immigrants began flooding into Greece in the 1990s (after the collapse of communism in Albania) it became apparent that Arvanitic was not Greek at all, but an “old” *Tosk* Albanian dialect. Arvanite communities nonetheless clung to their Greek national identity. They found it offensive to be called Albanians and were quick to point out differences between themselves and the Albanian immigrants.

While Greek and Albanian are distinct languages within the Indo-European classification of languages, they share many similarities in syntax and grammar. There are even ancient Greek words in the Arvanitic that are not used in Modern Greek. The word for mouse, *μι* in Arvanitic, is the ancient Greek word for mouse *μῦς*. *Νοῦκ* for the contraction “not” in Arvanitic is suspected to derive from the ancient Greek of *οὐκ*. The Arvanitic word for house, *στεπή* is also thought to derive from the ancient Greek word *σκηπή*. Similarly, *hades* is often used when referring to the underworld or afterlife. There are about 30 ancient Greek loan words in Arvanitic, but many linguists suspect that there are likely more. At the same time, colloquial Greek has adopted many Albanian words. George Babiniotis attributes about 50–75 words used in Modern Greek that derive from *Tosk* Albanian (BABINIOTIS 1998). Some examples include: *γκομάρι* for donkey, *γούβα* for ditch, *λουλουδι* for flower, *μπέσα* for the intransitive verb “come”, *καλικουτσα* to carry on ones back, *λουτσα* to be soaked, *σβέγκος* for neck, and *σίγουρα*, for the adverb “clearly” or “certainly”.

The Arvanite case is complex and language (in this case) is not the only factor when determining the Arvanites’ ethnic identity. Many scholars have suggested that the Arvanites spoke only Albanian and that it was only in the last one hundred years that they learned Greek. However, in most Arvanite communities in the Peloponnese (where the language has survived until the present), older generations of Arvanitic speakers recall that they and their families had always spoken Greek in addition to Arvanitic or as they call it *Αρβανίτικα*.

Older generation remember their great grandparents and great, great grandparents speaking Greek. Greek revolutionary heroes such as Andreas Miaoulis, Markos Botsaris, Antonios Kriezis, Georgios Kountouriotis, and Laskarina Bouboulina who were of Arvanite descent were also known to speak both Greek and Arvanitic. Thus, it is likely that the Arvanite communities in Greece spoke both Greek and Arvanitic for more than one hundred years. It is also likely that many Arvanite communities had known Greek since late Byzantine times. As Orthodox Christians they were under the authority of the Byzantine Empire and would have known Greek to engage in the political, economic, religious, and social affairs of the state.

Moreover, while historians and anthropologists have declared them as primarily an agriculturally based people who rarely left their towns and communities, many historical accounts mention them as mercenaries, hired by the Ottomans, Byzantines, Venetians, and Habsburgs to defend their empires. At the same time, historical records show that the Arvanites were also merchant traders who traded goods throughout the Mediterranean (BIRIS 1960).

Their identity also centered on their families or clans (*φάρα*), towns, and Church (DEDE 1998). Moreover, because a Greek education was valued in the Balkans for much of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, wealthy Arvanite merchants sent their children to Greek schools, where they were expected to learn Greek and drop their Arvanitic/Albanian language. Moreover, when Arvanites began immigrating to the United States, Australia, and Canada in the late nineteenth century, many of them identified as being Greek. In cities like New York, Chicago, Sydney, and Toronto, most Arvanites settled alongside other Greek immigrants and participated in the cultural and social life of that community.

Within Arvanite communities in Greece, both Greek and Arvanitic were spoken and depending on the occasion one language dominated the other. Funeral dirges and wedding songs for example were almost always sung in Arvanitic. Business contracts and other agreements between community members were almost always in Greek. Church services were exclusively in Greek, and families typically communicated in Arvanitic within their homes and towns.



Photograph 1: Members of an Arvanite community in the Argolis region of the Peloponnese. Circa 1950.

If a fellow Arvanitic speaker entered an Arvanitic town, locals would have preferred to communicate with the visitor in Arvanitic. If a non-Arvanitic speaker entered the community, members of the community spoke to visitors in Greek. At the same time Arvanitic speakers never felt threatened if discovered that they spoke a language other than Greek. The Arvanites saw themselves as being Greek, and their neighbors saw them this way as well. Differences between Greek speakers and Albanian speakers were seen as minor.

While early Greek school textbooks make no mention of the Arvanites, many late nineteenth century textbooks suggest that the Albanian people had a common cultural and historical connection to the ancient Greeks (PHILIPPIDOU 1900). Often they are described as the descendants of the pre-classical Pelasgians and Dorians who settled the Greek peninsula between 1000 and 800 BCE (PHILIPPIDOU 1900: 38). Differences between the two nations are not made apparent (or embellished) until the early twentieth century during Albania's national awakening and Greece's territorial expansion in the Balkans.

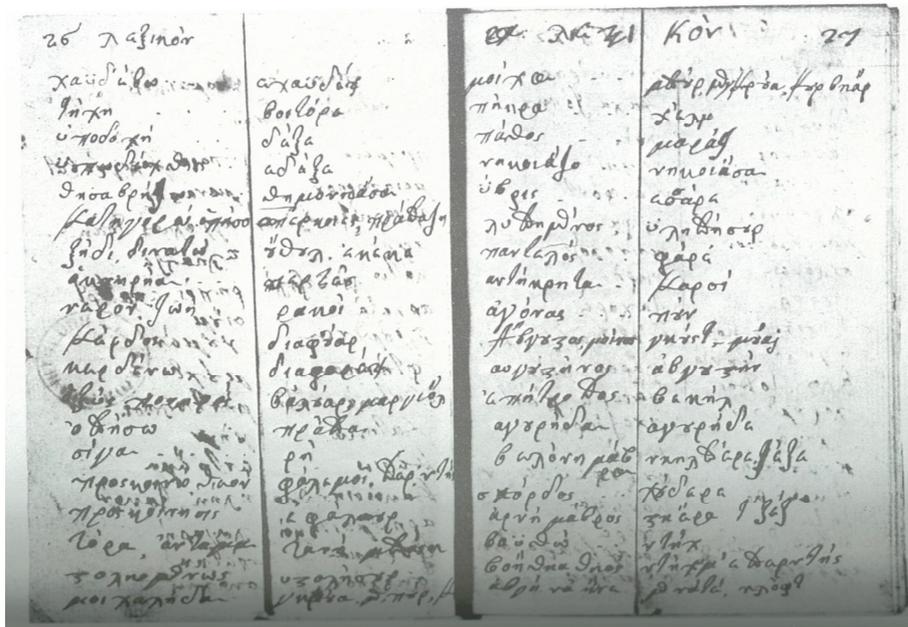
Attempts to promote cultural links between Albanians and Greeks were also encouraged by Markos Botsaris, Panayiotis Kupitoris and Anastas Kullurioti. It is important to say a few words about Botsaris, Kupitoris and Kullurioti since they all viewed an Arvanite ethnic identity differently. All three also promoted the teaching and learning of the Arvanitic language in Greece.

### **Botsaris, Kupitoris, and Kullurioti**

Markos Botsaris's (1788–1823) was part of the Greek-Albanian speaking Souliot clan of Epirus. He is most remembered for his heroism during the Greek War of Independence (1821–1827). His *Greek-Arvanitic (Albanian) Dictionary* (*Λεξικόν της Ρω-*

*μαίκοις και Αρβανητηκής Απλής*) provides a glimpse of the Arvanitic language just prior to the Greek Revolution (BOTSARIS 1809). It is also the first known attempt to link the Greek and Arvanitic languages. Botsaris's dictionary was completed in 1809 at the request of Francois Pouqueville the French general consul at the court of Ali Pasha. It is believed that Botsaris wrote the dictionary while his father and uncle dictated the words to him.

Botsaris's original dictionary includes about 1700 Greek entries and 1494 Arvanitic entries. The Greek words are in the left hand columns while the Albanian words are on the right.



Photograph 2: Botsaris's original *Dictionary*

The words are in no particular order. The Greek re-print of the dictionary is nearly 500 pages in length. It begins with Greek words used in Arvanitic. There are about 500 words that are borrowed from the Greek. For example, *αδικία* – *αδικική*, *ελευθερία* – *ελφτέρη*, *ευχαριστώ* – *ευχαριστίσουρε*, *φως* – *φως*, *θαυμάζω* – *θαμάξεμ*. There are also about 150 Turkish and 30 Italian loan words. There are no Latin words listed even though there are over 400 Latin loan words found in *Tosk* Albanian today.

Many of the Arvanitic words listed in Botsaris's dictionary are merely Greek words with an Arvanitic and Albanian pronunciation. Almost all of these deal with the religious practices of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Table 1: Sample of Greek Religious Words Used in Arvanitic

Agapis – αγάπῳ	foton – φῳτων
aghatho – αγαθῳς	kallogjer – καλῳγερος
aksi – αξία	kandile – κανδύλη
amarti – αμαρτία	colas – κόλαση
amartolo – αμαρτωλῳς	konismë – εικόντισμα
engjëll – άγγελος	ksemollojis – εξομολόγο
apostoll – απόστολος	liturji – λειτουργία
athanat – αθάνατος	livadh – λιβάδι
dhemon – δαίμων	stavrosurë – σταυρώνω
dhoksasurë – δοξάζω	thamasmë – θαύμασμα
eklisiasurë – εκκλησιάζω	thavsmë – θάυμα
evjeni – ευγενία	vllojisure – εύλογο
fanero – φανερός	zoi – ζωή

Panayiotis Kupitoris (1821–1881) was born on the island of Hydra in 1821. The island is thought to be settled almost exclusively by Arvanites. Like many of the locals of Hydra, Kupitoris grew up speaking both Greek and Arvanitic. After studying at the University of Athens, Kupitoris was appointed principal at several Greek secondary schools. He also opened an independent night school in Athens that taught students the Arvanitic/Albanian language. After purchasing a printing press with his close friend Anastas Kullurioti (who I discuss later in this section) in 1879, Kupitoris and Kullurioti began publishing the Greek and Albanian language newspaper *The Voice of Albania* (*Η Φωνή της Αλβανίας/Zëri i Shqipërisë*). The newspaper found a small readership and was discontinued after publishing only 40 issues.

The newspaper was seen as fervently nationalistic since it promoted the development of an Albanian national party in Greece and the liberation of Albania from the Ottoman Empire. In 1873, Kupitoris published his *Dictionary of Greek and Latin Words* (*Λεξικόν Λατινοελληνικόν*), which he hoped students in the upper Greek high schools would use (KUPITORIS 1873). In 1879 he published his *Albanian Studies: A Historical and Literary Essay About the Albanian Nation and its Language* (*Αλβανικά Μελέται – Πραγματεία ιστορική και φιλολογική περί της γλώσσης και του έθνους των Αλβανών*) and his *Study on Albanian Pronouns in the Third Person: In the Albanian Dialect in Greece and Particularly Hydra* (*Διατριβή περί της παρ' Αλβανούς αντωνυμίας του τρίτου προσώπου: Κατά την διάλεκτον των εν Ελλάδι Αλβανών μάλιστα την των Υδραίων*). In all three of these works Kupitoris argued that modern day Albanian was derived from ancient Illyrian, which was merely a lost northern ancient Greek dialect (KUPITORIS 1879a). He also tried to find similarities between the two languages, arguing that the Albanian language was mostly Greek with some Latin words and a few Germanic and Celtic words.

Like Kupitoris, Anastas Kullurioti (1822–1887) was also interested in the historical and linguistic relationship between Greek and Arvanitic. Kullurioti was born on the island of Salamis in 1822. Like Kupitoris he grew up speaking both Greek and Arvanitic/Albanian. He briefly immigrated to the United States, where he made a small fortune. Later he returned to Greece and settled in the Plaka district in Athens. Kullurioti attempted to preserve the Arvanite culture in Greece through the publica-

tion of his *Albanian Primer* or spelling book in 1882 (*Αλβανικών Αλφαβηταρίων* in Greek and Albanian) and in the same year his children's book *Milk for Babies* (*Klumësht për foshnja* in Greek and Albanian). Kullurioti's primer included Greek and Albanian folk tales, poetry, and proverbs. He later looked to document the oral literature of the Arvanites in a 196-page notebook, which was never published (CORNIS-POPE and NEUBAUER 2006: 290).

Kullurioti was also interested in establishing Albanian language schools throughout Greece. On June 4, 1883 he found the organization *Albanian Brotherhood*, whose mission was to strengthen cultural ties between Greeks and Albanians. Its members were composed of Arvanite intellectuals, professionals, and veterans of the Greek Revolution. In the early 1880's Kullurioti travelled to southern Albania to encourage Albanian nationalists to rise up against the Ottoman Empire (ELSIE 2012: 264). This brought him into conflict with both Greece and Turkey. He was imprisoned when he returned to Greece where he died under mysterious circumstances.

Most of his Kullurioti's work was intended for Arvanite communities in Greece. Kullurioti found the Arvanitic language to be no different than southern Albanian. He is considered a national hero in Albania today for his early attempts to preserve an Albanian national identity in Greece. He is also the only known writer of late nineteenth century Greece who made an effort (although minimal) to document what Arvanitic speaking children learned in their communities.

### Contemporary Linguistic and Cultural Landscapes

An 1879 Greek census found that in the Peloponnese, Central Greece, Euboea and the island of Andros there were nearly 225,000 Albanian/Arvanitic speakers. This number did not include Hydra and Spetses, which were traditionally Arvanitic speaking. The entire population of Greece at the time was about 1.6 million people. Today, the Arvanitic language has survived in several towns of the Argolis. Anastasia Karakasidou's study on Slavic speaking groups in northern Greece found that many Slavic groups felt pressure to change their last names into Greek sounding names (KARAKASIDOU 1997). Today many Arvanite's bear Greek and Albanian derived last names. Some last names that are believed to be Albanian in origin include: Πλάκας, Λιάπης, Κόλιας, Λιάκος, Βιγής, Μανεσσής. None of the locals remember having to change their names. At the same time, in some Arvanitic speaking villages the nickname (*παρατσούκλι*) of older generations are Albanian in origin. Some examples include: Κόκκας, Μπούτος, Σκυρτεση, and Διλλιλής.

Natural landmarks in many of the towns bear both Greek and Arvanitic names. One finds this in the Arvanite town of Prosymni. The town's official name is Prosymni, but locals still refer to it by its Arvanitic name of Berbati. For much of the twentieth century the Greek state took steps to officially change the names of towns that were not Greek. For example, Charvati became Mykinai (1916), Priftani – Monastiraki, (1928), Gkermepesi – Medea (1928), Dousia – Metochi (1927), Mermpakas – Agia Tria (1950), Pasas – Inachos (1975) (*National Hellenic Research Foundation* 2014).

Ancient landmarks in Prosymni typically have Greek names. Masto (Ancient Greek for breast) is named for a hill located on the town's plain (*κάμπος*). Glisoura (narrow or closed) is named for the ravine or valley that leads into the town. There is

also a local dish in Prosymni that is thought to be Albanian in origin. The dish *giossa* (γίοσα) or mutton, which is thought to have originated in Albania, is still made almost daily in several of Prosymni's taverns.

The question however remains how the Arvanitic language survived in towns like Prosymni for so long? Arvanite men were more likely to speak both Greek and Arvanitic because they typically ventured outside their towns and interacted with Greek speakers. Arvanite women rarely left their towns and had no real practical need to learn Greek. One early traveler from 1892 noted that,

The process of Hellenization is still going on, and the Albanian [*Arvanitic*] language is doomed in Greece; at present it is kept alive by the women, who, speaking no other, teach it to their children, and will continue to do so until the system of primary education for women is more widely extended in the Hellenic Kingdom (RENELL 1892: 19).

There are many cases in the later part of the last century of Arvanite women knowing no Greek at all, while their husbands and children knew both Greek and Arvanitic. Like most communities in Greece from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries women's roles revolved around their home, local town, family and the rearing of their children. Since women were expected to raise their children they often communicated with their children in Arvanitic. It was through this process that the language was passed on to future generation.

The Arvanitic language was also the spoken language of the community. It was a language that community members felt most comfortable communicating in, and it was the language of everyday expression. Members of many Arvanite communities remember their mothers and grandmothers singing to them in Arvanitic. Common expressions included *zemër mou* (my heart), *vajzë mou* (my girl) *djalë mou* (my boy), *chaidiari mou* (my dear). Many also remember the following childhood rhyme:

τάνα του τάνα του	Come on, come on
νιάλη βίνγα μάνα του	the child is rushing home from grandma's
Μάνα του σε ντούονου	But grandma did not welcome him
που με γκιούρ εγνιούνου	she warded him off with rocks

One of the best-known folk songs, sung in many of the Arvanite communities in the Peloponnese is *Ρα Καμπάνα ε Παπαντίς* (The Chimes of our Lady Papandi):

The chimes have pealed from our Lady Papandi; rise up dear soul and go to Church. The chimes have rung twice or thrice; Rise up dear soul and adorn yourself with your most elegant kerchief. Come this very instant, now that your mother's away at the dance. Come let me seize a kiss from you, now that I have drunk some wine (MORAITIS 2010 and HEMETEK et al. 2004).

The Chimes of our Lady Papandi is a romantic song that centers around the town, community, and Church and about how two lovers who find the opportunity to meet while their families are away (MORAITIS 2010).

Another romantic song dealt with a young man's obsession with a young maiden

'Απε τσέ γιέ κουμπισούρε	There you are leaning
Σί σενγκέ ε ζογραφίσουρε	Like a painted portrait
Ρουσου πόστε τέ τέ φλάς	Come down so I could sing to you
Μός νομίσι ότι τέ γκάς	And don't worry I will not fondle you

Other songs or ballads dealt with the Greek revolution and its Arvanite heroes:

Κιό γκλιούχα Αρμπερίστε	The Arvanitic language
ίστε γκλιούχ τρερίστε είναι	language of the brave
Έ φλίτ ναυαρχοί Μιαούλη	Spoken by the seaman Miaoulis
Μπότσαρη έδε γκίθ Σούλι	Botsaris and all of Souli (VAMBAS 1879).

Children learned songs like these in their communities by their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

### Conclusion

Why were not the Arvanites assimilated like other multilingual speaking groups in Greece, and why has the Arvanitic language survived in some parts of Greece until today? Most of the towns that still speak Arvanitic are located in the Argolis region of the Peloponnese. Older generations of people (between the ages of 60–100+) from these towns continue to speak Arvanitic as well as Greek. Many of the younger generations have working knowledge of the language. The towns of Prosymni and Limnes seem to have the greatest number of speakers today. The towns neighbor one another, but are still about 4 kilometers apart. Limnes is on higher elevation at about 520 meters above sea level where Prosymni is closer to lower ground. The nearest metropolitan cities are Argos and Nafplion. But the locals in Limnes still prefer to go into Corinth instead of Argos or Nafplion. Today modern roads have made it easier to access the towns, but for some time both Prosymni and Limnes had been mostly isolated. Several other towns in the area such as, Manesi, Dendra, Mykines, Inachos, Ira, Monastiraki, Neo Iraio, at one time are also thought to have also spoken Arvanitic at one time.

There is no question however, that Arvanitic is dying and will likely disappear with the next generation. The locals in the towns in Prosymni and Limnes likely learned Greek when systems of communications and commerce were extended to the neighboring commercial towns of Argos and Nafplion. Greek had historically been the language of trade in the region. We know that the residents had schools of some form or another from Ottoman times onward, and that some years after Greek independence a national Greek school had appeared in the region. Arvanite was partly preserved because the Arvanitic speaking communities in the area were not in the area of expansion sought by the Greek state for most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (they had become part of the Greek kingdom after the Revolution).

The *Megali Idea* or Greece's nineteenth century policy to reclaim lands that were thought to be Greek (and usually at the expense of other nation), looked to recreate ancient and Byzantine Greece based along geographic and cultural lines. Thessaly was incorporated in 1881, most of Macedonia and Epirus in 1913, and Western

Thrace in 1919. Non-Greek speakers from these areas felt the most pressure to drop their local languages and adopt Greek. Moreover, the Greek state diverted their educational resources in these areas. Schools were opened to teach Greek and locals eventually dropped their native tongues.

This type of pressure never occurred in most of the Arvanitic speaking towns in the Peloponnese, since they were already part of the Greek state. It was also essentially the women; the mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers who helped preserve the language in these towns. The language was learned by children in informal learning settings, in a space and around people that they were most comfortable around. It was a language that community members associated with their past, and with those that cared and nurtured them.

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