Arbëreshë, an 'Anthropological Miracle'

Roberta Cutillo (September 24, 2019)

A special event, featuring a lecture and music performance, held at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò traces the unique and little-known history of the Arbëreshë people of southern Italy, "an anthropological miracle," that can serve as a model of both cultural preservation and social integration.

Albania is a scattered nation, as the executive director of the Albanian Institute in New York [2] Dino Korca explained last night at a perhaps unexpected but fascinating event held at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò [3]. "There are more Albanians living outside of the country than in it," he explained, "and there is a varying amount of tension between different groups, particularly those living in the Balkan nations surrounding Albania itself. However, all Albanians share the same fondness and admiration for the Arbëreshë."

The Arbëreshë - the descendants of Albanian refugees who came to Italy between the 14th and 18th centuries as a consequence of the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans - are in fact a remarkable people, "an anthropological miracle," a model of integration and coexistence, and the protagonists of not one but two "Risorgimenti."

The night's event, a lecture followed by a live concert organized by NYU Professor Giovanni Braico and co-hosted by the Albanian Institute, was in fact dedicated to presenting their distinctive and still little-known history.

For the occasion, the auditorium was packed with a diverse audience made up of the usual Italians and Americans but also a lot of Albanians, Arbëreshë, and Albanian-Americans, who made their presence known once the band came on, by enthusiastically clapping and dancing along.

After a few words from Casa Director Stefano Albertini and from Mr. Dino Korca, Professor Braico came onstage, accompanied by his young daughter, who wore a blue and green, generously ruffled traditional Arbëreshë dress. He proceeded to introduce Professor Francesco Altimari, who teaches Albanology at the Università della Calabria and is amongst the leading experts on the subject.

The lecture's first slide called the Arbëreshë "an anthropological miracle," a phrase which the Professor explained was used by Pier Paolo Pasolini, [4] who was struck by their ability to be extremely proud proponents of both Albanian and Italian culture.

This is a point that all the speakers repeatedly brought up throughout the evening. Once they arrived in Italy and settled in villages throughout most of southern Italy and Sicily, the Arbëreshë managed to fully preserve their culture, even while, back in Albania, it was being erased under oppressive Ottoman rule. They were the ones who cultivated the memory of Skanderbeg, the most important hero in Albanian history. Not only did they use his figure as a unifying force to identify with abroad, they also brought it back to Albania, where it served as a driving force in the fight for the country's independence.

Prof. Altimari in fact said that the Arbëreshë were instrumental in not one but two Risorgimenti: first in Italy, then in Albania. He cited several influential Italian intellectuals who, unbeknownst to most, were Arbëreshë and who contributed to the unification of Italy and the country's subsequent history, the most famous amongst them being Antonio Gramsci [5].

It was then time for the Peppa Marriti Band [6] to take the stage for their first-ever US performance. Prof. Braico introduced them by pointing out how, as one of the most emotional and engaging forms of oral transmission, music has played a big part in the preservation of Albanian and Arbëreshë culture throughout the centuries.

In their performance, the band guided the audience on a musical journey ranging from the most traditional songs to their own contemporary interpretations. The pieces varied in genre and mood, from melancholic harmonies, to much more rhythmic, upbeat songs. At one point the initial three performers - two men in jeans and a woman wearing a traditional dress - were joined onstage by three others and the show turned into a proper jam session.

The Peppa Marriti band started playing their own compositions, which mixed the traditional music they grew up with in their hometown of Santa Sofia d'Epiro in Calabria with elements of rock and blues for a more modern feel. They have recorded three disks so far and their songs cover a wide range of topics, from migration, to the joy of singing, to a compilation of popular sayings. All of them play a fundamental role in helping to preserve a language, which, with less and less young people learning it, is becoming at risk of extinction.

The musicians are aware of this and you could see the passion in the way they played, how they danced. The main singer was wearing a t-shirt that read 'Radio Epiro,' which he later explained is the name of a pirate radio station from Santa Sofia that broadcasts songs in Italian and Arbëreshë - yet another example of seamless integration. His energy was incredible and his emotion palpable everytime he introduced a song, particularly one that he described as "an Albanian song that is popular throughout the Balkans and brings together these separate countries."

As if to prove his point, several audience members let out shouts of approval and many spontaneously started clapping to the beat as soon as the song began.

The band then closed the show with a joyful "farewell wedding song," apparently the last song played at the ceremony as the newlyweds ride away and it was finally time for questions from the audience, the most moving of which came from an American man of Albanian descent. "Thank you so much for coming here, this feels like finding a family I lost centuries ago," he began, his voice lightly trembling, "I would like to ask you a thousand questions but I guess the most important one is how can you manage to preserve your culture when you emigrate?"

To this, Prof. Altimari promptly answered: "As Arbëreshë history teaches us, you have to be proud of your origins. If you're ashamed, you lose your culture and you lose yourself."

And that's certainly a great lesson we can all learn from the Arbëreshë and one that our world is desperately in need of now: it is possible to simultaneously belong to and love more than one country, to integrate into a new place while also preserving the culture of another. In sum, integration is possible and it doesn't require assimilation.

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