

## **Singing Identity in Digital Spaces: Arbëresh Music, Cultural Memory, and Online Platforms**

**Dr. Barbara Gabriella Renzi**

**Abstract:** This article explores the role of Arbëresh music in preserving cultural memory and sustaining community identity within digital spaces. The Arbëresh people—descendants of 15th-century Albanian migrants to southern Italy—have long used music as a medium for storytelling, nostalgia, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. In an era of globalisation and linguistic decline, digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have become vital tools for cultural preservation and revitalisation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Portocannone, lyrical analysis, and personal narratives from both local informants and members of the diaspora, this study examines how online engagement with traditional music fosters a powerful sense of belonging. It argues that nostalgia is not merely a passive emotion but an active force in cultural resilience, particularly when amplified through digital media. Ultimately, this article contends that Arbëresh music in the digital age serves not only as a repository of memory, but as a living archive—a bridge between past and future, where identity is not just preserved, but continuously reimagined.

**Keywords:** *Arbëresh culture, Silvana Licursi, Qifti Group, Digital memory, Cultural preservation, Affect theory, Diaspora studies.*

### **Introduction**

The Arbëreshë culture, originating from the Albanian communities that settled in southern Italy during the 15th century, represents a unique and enduring confluence of tradition, memory, and identity. Over the centuries, the Arbëreshë people have faced numerous challenges due to migration and the pressure of

assimilation into broader Italian society. Yet, despite these challenges, they have managed to preserve a rich cultural heritage that remains deeply rooted in their ancient language, customs, religious practices, and, importantly, their music. This preservation of culture through music has been central to the community's ability to maintain its distinct identity and pass down values, stories, and practices to new generations (Musacchio and Renzi 10–11; Mandalà and Knittlová 16; Renzi 16).

Central to the preservation of Arbëreshë culture is music, which serves as both a vessel for cultural memory and a means for narrating the history and experiences of migration, resilience, and survival. Through songs, lullabies, and children's songs, the Arbëreshë people have been able to express their collective memories of displacement and endurance while also celebrating their ongoing connection to their ancestral lands. Music, in this way, has been an essential medium for keeping the community's heritage alive, even as the world around them continues to change (Musacchio and Renzi 27-98; Renzi 16).

In recent years, the emergence of digital technologies has played a pivotal role in the evolution of Arbëreshë music. The introduction of platforms such as *YouTube* and *Facebook* has given artists like Silvana Licursi<sup>i</sup> and music groups like Qifti<sup>ii</sup> the ability to reach wider audiences beyond their traditional, often geographically isolated, communities. These digital platforms have opened up unprecedented opportunities for cultural dissemination, reinterpretation, and engagement. By sharing their music online, Arbëreshë artists are not only able to preserve their traditions, but they also transform the way in which their cultural identity is expressed and experienced (Mandalà and Knittlová). Through these platforms, the music of the Arbëreshë people finds new life in the globalised digital world, where it can be shared, celebrated, and understood by people from various cultural backgrounds.

In this context, Arbëreshë music online exemplifies the way cultural memory functions as both a material and affective force in the contemporary world. It is no longer just a reflection of the past but also a dynamic, evolving

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expression of identity that is being reshaped by the possibilities of digital engagement. As globalisation and digitisation continue to shape the cultural landscape, the music of the Arbëreshë community serves as a reminder of how cultural memory can adapt and thrive, even in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world (Musacchio and Renzi; Mandalà and Knittlová; Renzi). This article seeks to explore how Arbëreshë music functions as a conduit for cultural memory and identity within digital environments, examining the emotional force of nostalgia, the challenges of linguistic decline, and the role of platforms like *YouTube* and *Facebook* in reshaping intergenerational connections and cultural expression. Through ethnographic fieldwork, lyrical analysis, and personal narratives, it investigates how digital spaces not only preserve but actively transform Arbëreshë cultural heritage in response to the pressures of modernity.

### **Methodology**

This study is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2022 in the Arbëresh village of Portocannone, located in the Molise region of southern Italy. The research focused on in-depth interviews and field diaries collected from members of the local community, with particular attention to both elderly informants and middle-aged participants reflecting on generational changes. These primary sources offer rich, firsthand insight into the lived experiences of cultural transmission, memory, and identity within the Arbëresh diaspora. Adopting a qualitative methodological framework, the study integrates these primary ethnographic materials with secondary sources to explore the role of Arbëresh music in the preservation and expression of cultural identity, particularly within digital spaces. Personal narratives and testimonies gathered during fieldwork highlight the emotional and symbolic significance of music as a vehicle for nostalgia and belonging. These accounts shed light on how individuals engage with traditional songs and performances online, and how such engagement contributes to the continuity of cultural memory. Furthermore, the study includes an analysis of the works of prominent Arbëresh artists—most notably Silvana

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Licursi—through close readings of song lyrics and digital interaction patterns on platforms such as *YouTube* and *Facebook*. Secondary literature on cultural memory, migration, and linguistic heritage complements the analysis, situating the case of Arbëresh music within wider discourses on globalisation and intangible cultural heritage. Taken together, this multi-layered approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how Arbëresh music operates as a dynamic tool of identity negotiation and cultural resilience in the digital age.

### **The Role of Nostalgia in Sustaining Arbëresh Cultural Identity**

Nostalgia plays a central role in the preservation of Arbëresh traditions and the Arbëresh language, acting as a powerful bridge that connects the historical roots, present identity, and future resilience of the community. In the face of ongoing change and the pressures of modernisation, nostalgia provides the emotional and cultural framework that allows the Arbëresh people to maintain their sense of self and their unique heritage (Musacchio & Renzi; Renzi). Music, in this context, serves as one of the most profound carriers of cultural memory (Skorepová; Berry). Through music, the Arbëresh language and cultural practices are passed down, offering both a means of reflection on the past and a method for securing the continuity of traditions in the present.

Nostalgia, in the case of the Arbëresh people, is not merely a sentimental longing for a distant past, but a dynamic emotional force that intertwines memory, identity, and belonging. Nostalgia fulfils several crucial functions:

- **Emotional Grounding:** In times of uncertainty, nostalgia offers a source of emotional stability, helping individuals maintain a sense of belonging in a world that is increasingly influenced by external forces. It acts as a constant reminder of one's cultural heritage, which offers comfort and solace during moments of adversity (Musacchio & Renzi).
  - **Historical Continuity:** Nostalgia fosters a sense of historical continuity, allowing individuals to view their personal and collective experiences as part of a larger, ongoing cultural narrative. It provides a connection to the
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past, reinforcing the notion that the struggles, triumphs, and stories of previous generations are integral to the current journey of the community (Mandalà & Knittlová).

- **Intergenerational Transmission:** Nostalgia becomes a powerful mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of values, stories, and historical consciousness. Through music, oral histories, festivals, and family traditions, nostalgia ensures that the cultural essence of the Arbëresh people is passed down to younger generations, preserving their identity for the future. It connects the young to the old, allowing them to engage with and understand their heritage in a meaningful way (Renzi).

### **The Threat of Cultural Erosion**

While nostalgia plays an essential role in preserving cultural identity, there is an increasing threat to its power and efficacy. As Arbëresh songs and other traditional cultural practices gradually fade from daily life in communities like Portocannone, the risk extends beyond the loss of music—it touches the very foundation of Arbëresh identity itself. The diminishing presence of cultural expressions threatens to erode the emotional and social bonds that have historically tied the community together (Renzi).<sup>iii</sup>

Elders within the community have raised significant concerns about the younger generation's growing detachment from the cultural heritage that has sustained the community for centuries. With the increasing dominance of digital culture, the younger members of the Arbëresh community are increasingly disconnected from their linguistic and historical roots. The immersion in globalised digital media—largely dominated by Italian and international platforms—has led to:

- **A Loss of Connection to Linguistic and Historical Roots:** As digital culture absorbs the younger generation, many of them struggle to retain their connection to the Arbëresh language and customs. The transmission of language is faltering, with fewer young people speaking the traditional
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dialect, which diminishes the community's ability to express and understand the full depth of its cultural and historical legacy.

- **Decline in Nostalgia:** With the waning importance of cultural traditions, nostalgia itself is in danger of losing its potency. For many younger individuals, nostalgia no longer resonates with the same strength, as the emotional attachment to cultural practices is weakened. The sense of shared history and collective memory begins to dissipate, leading to a fragmented sense of identity and a weakened connection to the values that have sustained the community for generations.<sup>iv</sup>

This decline in nostalgia contributes to the erosion of cultural identity, as the younger generations become less aware of the stories, traditions, and memories that once gave their community strength and cohesion. The loss of cultural identity also poses a direct threat to the survival of the Arbëresh language, which is not only a mode of communication but also a repository of shared history, memories, and values (Renzi).

### **Personal Narratives and the Power of Memory**

The following reflections emerge from my ethnographic fieldwork, conducted primarily in 2022 with the support of a FEL<sup>v</sup> research grant. This segment explores how nostalgia functions as a vital force within Arbëresh communities, particularly among women, as a means of preserving cultural memory and affirming identity across generations. Through personal narratives and intimate recollections, nostalgia becomes more than a longing for the past—it transforms into a powerful tool for resilience, continuity, and self-understanding.

Nostalgia finds expression through music, oral histories, art, and traditions, serving as a powerful means of preserving cultural memory and reinforcing identity. These mediums create a bridge between the past and present, offering individuals and communities a sense of belonging and resilience.

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Costantina,<sup>vi</sup> an Arbëresh woman, turns to nostalgia for strength during difficult times. She reflects on her ancestors' endurance through invasions and hardships, drawing inspiration from their resilience. For her, memory is not just a recollection of the past but a source of empowerment. By connecting with the struggles and perseverance of those before her, she is able to navigate her own challenges with a renewed sense of endurance and cultural identity.

E.M., a post-World War II teacher<sup>vii</sup>, captures the complexities of nostalgia and displacement in her diary. Living in post-war Rome, she longs for her homeland and reflects on her ancestors' experiences. Memory becomes her anchor, providing solace and direction as she copes with uncertainty. Through remembering the customs and language of past generations, she preserves her cultural identity and maintains a connection to her roots. Her reflections also highlight the importance of historical awareness, demonstrating how personal memories intertwine with collective history.

Her diary illustrates how memory serves as a bridge across generations, helping individuals stay connected to their heritage and find meaning in their experiences. By embracing nostalgia, she reaffirms her sense of belonging, demonstrating the enduring power of cultural memory even in times of displacement.

### **Arbëresh Songs: A Legacy of Nostalgia**

Arbëresh songs play a vital and multifaceted role in preserving the cultural identity of the Arbëresh community, with nostalgia emerging as a prominent and recurring theme. As a powerful medium of collective memory, music has long served to document shared experiences and maintain cultural continuity. For the Arbëresh people, traditional songs do more than recount historical events—they reaffirm a deep connection to ancestral roots. These songs serve as intergenerational bridges, transmitting stories of hardship, resilience, and identity, ensuring that cultural memory remains alive, even as younger generations confront the forces of modernisation and cultural assimilation. As Antonia

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Marchianò notes, these songs are essential in preserving not only language but also the symbolic and emotional landscape of a people in diaspora (Marchianò 10).

One of the most prominent ways in which nostalgia is woven into Arbëresh music is through its exploration of displacement, longing for home, and the loss of a familiar place. For the Arbëresh community, many of whom are descendants of Albanians who migrated to southern Italy in the 15th century to escape Ottoman invasions, the theme of displacement is not just a personal experience; it is embedded in the collective consciousness of the community (Musacchio & Renzi; Mandalà & Knittlová). The songs of the Arbëresh people often speak of migration, exile, and the pain of leaving behind one's homeland. These themes resonate deeply with the community, even for those born in Italy, as they serve as a constant reminder of their ancestors' journey and the struggles they endured (Renzi).

The power of nostalgia in these songs is not simply a longing for the past, but a way to understand the present and ensure that the culture and identity of the community are passed on to future generations. Through music, the Arbëresh people maintain a strong emotional connection to their historical roots, allowing their cultural heritage to remain vibrant despite the pressures of assimilation and modernisation (Musacchio & Renzi; Renzi). Music, therefore, serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a cultural archive that safeguards the linguistic and historical traditions of the Arbëresh people (Mandalà & Knittlová).

Silvana Licursi's song *E Ikura* ("The Fugitive") is a powerful example of nostalgia in Arbëresh music. It was published on *YouTube* on March 4, 2010, as indicated by the upload date of the official video. However, it has much older origins, as highlighted by the sources in my ethnographic research. It likely emerged during a period of forced migration. It tells the poignant story of a woman forced to leave her homeland, gathering leaves and flowers as symbols of remembrance (*E Ikura*). This act reflects the deep connection between memory, nature, and home, emphasising the pain of displacement.

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The song resonates beyond individual sorrow, capturing the collective experience of exile and longing within the Arbëresh community. It preserves their history of migration and resilience, offering younger generations a link to their heritage in an era of fading linguistic and cultural traditions. Licursi's performance bridges tradition and modernity, making *E Ikura* accessible to new audiences. By blending historical themes with contemporary musical elements, she ensures that the song's emotional weight and cultural significance remain alive, demonstrating how nostalgia in music keeps traditions evolving while staying deeply rooted in the past. Here is one of the old songs that speaks of forced migration.

### ***THE FUGITIVE***

*Dressed all in black  
a young girl left her village  
and went to bid farewell  
to her homeland.  
She came upon a black mulberry tree  
and tore off a tuft of leaves;  
she came upon an apple tree, and broke  
off some twigs with small fragrant apples.  
She picked wildflowers  
and filled her apron with them.  
Then, weeping,  
she began her lament for her homeland:  
I greet you, my land!  
I greet you because I am leaving you,  
and I shall never see you again.  
I have no place to go,  
no village to dwell in,  
no house in which to stay...  
These twigs and these flowers*

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*will wither as soon as I'm far away,  
but they will never tear from my heart  
my love for you.  
Farewell, my land!  
Farewell, my land! (Licursi)*

This is a deeply emotional piece that expresses the pain of being forced to leave one's homeland. The girl, dressed in black, signals mourning—not just for a person, but for a place, a life, a sense of belonging. Her departure is not chosen; it feels inevitable and irreversible, filled with sorrow and finality. As she walks away, she interacts tenderly with the landscape. She gathers leaves from a black mulberry tree, breaks fragrant apple twigs, and fills her apron with wildflowers. These acts are quiet, symbolic gestures—she's not just collecting plants, she's trying to hold onto fragments of her home, something tangible to carry with her. Nature becomes a representation of everything she's leaving behind: memories, roots, comfort. Her words reveal profound dislocation. She doesn't just lack a destination—she lacks everything that gives life structure and meaning: a place to go, a village to live in, a home to return to. This sense of homelessness and abandonment is universal, evoking the experience of refugees, migrants, and anyone who has ever been torn from the soil of their identity. Yet even in the midst of her grief, she proclaims a fierce love. Though the twigs and flowers she carries will wither, the love she holds for her homeland will never fade. This love is permanent, spiritual, and untouched by distance or time. It suggests that while the body can be exiled, the heart remains rooted. The repetition of "Farewell, my land!" at the end reinforces the ritual of parting. It's as if she's trying to make peace with her loss, to give her homeland the respect and finality of a proper goodbye. The lament is sorrowful but dignified, personal but universal.

This song helps to ensure that the experience of migration is continually shared and passed on, binding individuals together through common memories of struggle, loss, and survival.

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The power of nostalgia in these songs is not merely sentimental; it is an active force that connects people across time and space, creating solidarity between generations. It strengthens the sense of belonging, even for those who have never set foot in the land of their ancestors. Through nostalgia, songs like *E Ikura* become more than just a reflection of the past—they are living, breathing expressions of collective memory that shape how the Arbëresh people perceive themselves and their place in the world today.

The relationship between nostalgia and cultural identity is one of mutual reinforcement. As the Arbëresh community continues to face challenges brought on by modernisation, urbanisation, and the pressures of a globalised world, songs like *E Ikura* ensure that their cultural heritage remains a vital part of their present and future. Through music, nostalgia fosters a deep connection to the past, grounding individuals in their history and guiding them as they navigate the complexities of modern life. And in doing so, it helps preserve the unique and enduring identity of the Arbëresh people for generations to come.

### **Reflections from Elders: A Sense of Kinship Across Generations**

The emotional impact of songs like *E Ikura* is not just felt by the Arbëresh community in Italy. The song, and the themes of nostalgia and displacement it evokes, resonate deeply with Arbëresh individuals living in the diaspora. The modern migration of Albanians to Italy, especially in the 1990s when many Albanians sought refuge in Italy due to political and economic instability, stirred deep emotions within the Arbëresh community<sup>viii</sup>. Many Arbëresh people, including Silvana Licursi, view these new migrants as "brothers and sisters" due to the shared experience of migration, exile, and the longing for home.<sup>ix</sup> The similarity between the historical struggles of the Arbëresh ancestors and the contemporary experiences of Albanian migrants is a strong point of connection. In this way, nostalgia not only serves to preserve the past but also creates a sense of empathy and solidarity within the community.

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For Arbëresh elders, the connection to the modern migrants is profound. Many see the newer waves of Albanian migrants as part of the same long story of survival and resilience that their own ancestors lived. As they listen to songs like *E Ikura*, which tells the story of a woman leaving her homeland, they are reminded of their own ancestors' journeys and the difficult decisions they had to make when they too left their homeland in search of safety and a better life. The melodies and lyrics evoke memories of the difficult choices their forebears had to make, often leaving everything behind in search of safety, dignity, and a better future. In these songs, the past is not distant; it echoes in the present, connecting generations through shared experiences of loss, migration, and the enduring love for a land left behind. This is evident in the song “The Falcon” as well.

***THE FALCON***

*It was a day  
in the month of May  
with little sun  
and no wind.  
I lifted my eyes  
up toward the sky,  
I saw the falcon  
speaking our language.*

*It was a day  
in the month of May  
with little sun  
and no wind.  
There was a violet,  
very lovely:  
I reached out my hand  
and picked it with joy.*

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*And when I reached  
the threshold of home,  
my mother asked me:  
"What flower is this?"  
"It's a violet,  
very lovely:  
I reached out my hand  
and picked it with joy."*

*You, rose,  
you, budding flower,  
who belong to me—  
everyone knows it.  
Now that these eyes  
have seen you,  
no one else  
dares come near. (Licursi)*

"The Falcon" is a poetic and symbolic song that weaves together elements of nature with deep emotions tied to identity, love, and belonging. At first glance, it may seem like a simple description of a day in May, but beneath the surface lies a layered narrative filled with meaning.

The image of the falcon speaking "our language" is both powerful and mysterious. The falcon, a solitary and noble creature, appears in the sky and communicates in the voice of the people. This suggests a deep connection between the natural world and cultural identity. Even something that soars high above, distant and free, retains a bond with the land and those who inhabit it. The falcon might also represent an ancestral or spiritual presence, watching over and speaking to those who remain. The act of picking a violet with joy is gentle and tender, yet rich in emotional weight. The flower becomes a symbol of something pure, perhaps love, or the fragile beauty of a fleeting moment. When the protagonist returns home and shares it with his mother, there is a sense of return,

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of grounding, of offering something meaningful from the outside world to the intimate space of home and family. The final stanza shifts in tone—from contemplative to intensely possessive. The rose, or the "newborn flower," becomes a metaphor for a beloved person, whose beauty has been seen, claimed, and now fiercely protected. The voice becomes exclusive and protective, almost jealous, reflecting a love that is strong, all-encompassing, and territorial. The reactions of older generations to a song like *The Falcon* are often deep and emotional, as the lyrics speak directly to memory, identity, and tradition. They recognise familiar symbols—the falcon, the flower, the mother—and find in them a poetic language that reflects the values of their past: respect for nature, the importance of family, and a love that is felt with intensity and seriousness. For those who have experienced migration or separation from their homeland, the image of the falcon "speaking our language" evokes a strong sense of cultural continuity. Nature itself seems to carry the voices, sounds, and emotions of the community, even across time and distance. The final stanza, with its protective and resolute tone, resonates with how love was understood in earlier generations—exclusive, devoted, and bound by a strong sense of responsibility and honour. They do not hear this song merely as poetry; they hear it as a reflection of their land, and the emotional and moral codes that shaped their lives. It moves them, makes them reflect, and often stirs a quiet pride in knowing that such meaningful words still have a place in the present.<sup>x</sup>

### **The Decline of Language and the Erosion of Nostalgia**

In communities like Portocannone<sup>xi</sup>, the decline of the Arbëresh language signals much more than the simple loss of a means of communication<sup>xii</sup>—it marks the gradual erosion of cultural identity itself.<sup>xiii</sup> For the Arbëresh people, language is not only a practical tool for daily life but also a repository for their history, traditions, and collective memory. The Arbëresh language carries with it centuries of shared experiences, struggles, and triumphs. It embodies the spirit of a community that has survived through migration, adversity, and the passage of time.

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The elders of the community express deep sorrow over the loss of their language, understanding that each word that fades from daily use is a fragment of their cultural history slipping away. As one elder sadly states:

*"With every fading word of our language, a piece of our past vanishes into oblivion. Without our language, we lose ourselves."*<sup>xiv</sup>

This loss is not merely about linguistic diversity; it is about the very essence of their cultural identity. Language serves as a vessel of cultural memory, and when it begins to disappear, it takes with it the stories, traditions, and practices that define the Arbëresh way of life. Without their language, the Arbëresh people risk losing access to the depth of their history, and the connection between past generations and future ones weakens. Language is a bridge between these generations, and its decline threatens the continuity of cultural identity across time.

### **Linguistic Vulnerability and Solutions beyond Education**

The decline of the Arbëresh language reflects a broader trend affecting minority languages in Italy and across Europe. Many Arbëresh dialects, passed down for generations, are disappearing without documentation, resulting in the loss of unique cultural perspectives (Derhemi). Nearly half of the Arbëresh communities in Italy have already lost their native tongue, as younger generations struggle to maintain fluency. The widespread dominance of Italian in education, media, and government accelerates this shift, while global digital media further isolates Arbëresh speakers from their linguistic heritage. As Italian becomes the primary language in daily life, Arbëresh is increasingly marginalised, weakening cultural ties for future generations.

The decline of the Arbëresh language presents a significant challenge to the survival of the community's cultural identity, but the solution is not as simple as implementing language programs or teaching grammar and vocabulary. While

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education plays an important role in language preservation, it is insufficient on its own to ensure the survival of the Arbëresh language. Educational programs can provide the tools to learn the language, but they cannot instill the emotional connection needed to foster a deep, lasting attachment to the language.

Elders in the Arbëresh community are keenly aware of this, and they emphasise the importance of creating an emotional connection to the language. Language is not just about fluency; it is about pride and nostalgia. Younger generations need to understand (or better feel) the importance of the language not just as a tool of communication but as a carrier of the community's history, culture, and identity. It is crucial that pride in the language is cultivated, so that it is seen as a key part of the Arbëresh identity—something to be cherished, celebrated, and preserved.

Nostalgia plays a vital role in this process. When younger generations are able to connect emotionally to their cultural heritage, they are more likely to engage with the language and appreciate its significance. Elders often share stories, memories, and songs in the Arbëresh language to remind the younger members of the community of its importance. Through these emotional connections, nostalgia can create a bond that motivates individuals to learn and speak the language, not out of obligation, but out of a sense of pride and belonging.

The survival of the Arbëresh language depends on a collective effort to preserve both its linguistic richness and its cultural significance. The younger generations must be encouraged to view the language not just as a subject to be studied, but as an essential part of who they are, rooted in the memories, struggles, and triumphs of their ancestors. Through language programs that connect students to their heritage, through community initiatives that celebrate the language, and through the emotional connection that elders foster with the younger generations, the Arbëresh language can be revitalised and passed on as a living, breathing part of the community's future (Roberts 150; O'Reilly).

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In this broader framework of cultural preservation, music can play a vital and deeply resonant role. Traditional Arbëresh songs, with their poetic lyrics and distinct melodies, serve as repositories of historical narratives, collective memory, and identity. By promoting the performance and teaching of these musical traditions in schools, festivals, and community gatherings, the language can be kept alive in a form that is emotionally engaging and accessible to younger audiences. Music, as a universal medium of expression, transcends generational divides and has the unique ability to evoke a sense of belonging and pride. When young people sing in Arbëresh, they are not only practising the language—they are embodying the culture, reliving its stories, and carrying forward its spirit. Therefore, integrating music into language preservation efforts is not merely an artistic choice, but a strategic and culturally meaningful one that reinforces linguistic vitality through emotional connection and shared cultural expression.<sup>xv</sup>

### **The Importance of Online Platforms in Nostalgia and Preserving Collective Memory**

In today's digital age, online platforms have become vital tools for preserving and sharing cultural heritage (Hutson). As globalisation continues to reshape the world, traditional means of cultural transmission, such as face-to-face interactions and local gatherings, face challenges in reaching the younger generation. However, the rise of digital platforms, such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*, has provided new opportunities to combat this erosion and to revitalise nostalgia by connecting individuals to their roots in ways previously unimaginable (Obiajulim Vivian et al.).

For the Arbëresh community, the importance of online platforms in sustaining nostalgia and salvaging cultural memory cannot be overstated. These platforms provide an accessible, dynamic space for individuals across the globe to share their cultural heritage, share stories, music, and traditions, and re-establish connections with their past (The Arberesh of Sacramento, California, The Arberesh of New York, Arbëreshë of New York, The Arberesh Community in New Orleans). The internet allows Arbëresh people—whether living in Italy or

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spread across the diaspora—to reclaim their identity and engage with their cultural history in a meaningful way.<sup>xvi</sup>

Music plays a central role in this process. Through platforms like *YouTube*, *Spotify*, and *SoundCloud*, Arbëresh music is made available to a global audience. Traditional songs, such as those by Silvana Licursi, which speak of displacement, resilience, and home, have the power to awaken deep emotions, connecting people to their ancestors' stories and struggles. Songs like *E Ikura* and *Vare Vare* are no longer confined to village festivals or gatherings but can now be streamed at the click of a button, enabling both the Arbëresh diaspora and younger generations to experience and reflect on their cultural legacy anytime, anywhere.

Beyond music, social media platforms create communities where individuals can share personal narratives, photos, videos, and stories that link them to their shared history. Online groups and forums dedicated to the Arbëresh culture provide a space where members can exchange memories, offer support, and celebrate their traditions. These platforms bridge the geographical distances that separate the global Arbëresh community, allowing people who may never have visited their ancestral villages to feel connected to the culture and history that bind them together (The Arberesh of Sacramento California, The Arberesh of New York, Arbëreshë of New York, The Arberesh Community in New Orleans).

The ability to preserve and transmit nostalgia through digital media means that the memories of past generations are no longer at risk of fading into obscurity. By making cultural expressions and personal stories accessible online, platforms provide a tangible way to document and safeguard the intangible aspects of culture—such as language, music, and rituals—that are often passed down orally or in person. This digital documentation becomes an intergenerational archive, ensuring that future generations have access to these cultural treasures.

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Furthermore, online platforms offer a space for reinterpretation and creative adaptation, allowing young people to engage with their heritage in new and exciting ways. This interaction between nostalgia and modernity is essential for the continued survival of cultural traditions, as it invites younger generations to find personal meaning in their heritage. Whether through digital storytelling, online tutorials on Arbëresh songs, or the sharing of virtual cultural events, technology gives young people the tools to reclaim their identity while still embracing the future.

In a world where cultural heritage can easily be lost amidst rapid technological and social change, the ability to access, share, and reinterpret cultural expressions online provides a means of salvaging and preserving the memory of people. These platforms not only serve as archives; they act as living spaces where culture can continue to evolve, adapt, and thrive. For the Arbëresh people and other similar communities, the internet serves as a lifeline, allowing them to revitalise nostalgia, ensuring that their stories, languages, and traditions are remembered, celebrated, and passed on for generations to come.

### **Music as a Cultural Lifeline: Voices from the Arbëresh Diaspora**

The impact of Licursi's music extends far beyond Italy. It has reached Arbëresh individuals in the diaspora, helping them reconnect with their heritage and find a sense of belonging. Through interviews with people from the Arbëresh diaspora, it becomes clear how music serves as a cultural lifeline, allowing individuals to rediscover their ancestral identity and pass it down to future generations. Below are a few personal stories that illustrate the powerful impact Licursi's music has had on individuals living far from their ancestral homeland.

Emily (32, Chicago), who grew up in a family where Italian was spoken and Arbëresh traditions were not actively maintained, found her connection to her heritage through Silvana Licursi's music. Emily recalls her experience: *"Hearing 'Vare Vare' brought back memories I didn't even know I had. Now, I play her songs every Sunday—it's my way of keeping our culture alive."*<sup>xvii</sup>

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For Emily, Licursi's music was the key that unlocked a connection to a part of her heritage that had been lost over time. The song, with its traditional melodies and lyrics in the Arbëresh language, allowed her to reclaim a cultural memory she hadn't known she was missing. By playing Licursi's songs every week, Emily honours her ancestors and ensures that her connection to the Arbëresh community remains strong, even while living far from Italy.

Michael (45, New York), a second-generation Arbëresh-American, experienced a deep emotional awakening through Licursi's song *Qifti*. His great-grandfather, like many Arbëresh, migrated to the U.S. during the early 20th century, and by the time Michael's father was born, much of the language and cultural practices had faded from their family. Michael describes the significance of the song: "*When I heard 'Qifti,' it hit me hard. I finally understood what my ancestors went through. That song made me feel part of a greater story.*"<sup>xviii</sup> The song provided him with a sense of continuity and belonging, making him realise that he was part of a much larger narrative, one that spans generations of migration and survival. His deep emotional response to the song speaks to how music can be a powerful tool for understanding personal and collective identity, helping individuals piece together the lost fragments of their family history.

Jessica (28, Los Angeles), a young woman who began studying minority languages in college, discovered her Arbëresh heritage through her academic interests. While researching the history of minority languages in Italy, she stumbled upon the term "Arbëresh" and started to uncover and explore her family's background. Upon hearing *E Ikura*, a song by Licursi, Jessica was moved to tears: "*When I heard 'E Ikura,' I cried. It connected me to a history I never knew. Now, I'm learning the language and teaching my cousins about our heritage*"<sup>xix</sup>. This song was a pivotal moment in Jessica's journey to reconnect with her roots. The song not only awakened her sense of identity but also inspired her to begin learning the Arbëresh language, something she had never been taught. Jessica now actively shares this newfound knowledge with her younger cousins, ensuring that the language and the culture are passed on to the next

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generation. Licursi's music, in this instance, acted as a catalyst for cultural revival, helping Jessica to rediscover and embrace her heritage. Through their powerful lyrics and melodies, Silvana Licursi's songs have become more than just music—they are a tool for cultural preservation and identity formation. By connecting with individuals in both Italy and the diaspora, Licursi's music has helped Arbëresh people reclaim their heritage and pass it on to future generations. For Emily, Michael, and Jessica, Licursi's songs have provided a bridge to the past and a way to navigate their identities in the present. As more individuals rediscover their Arbëresh roots through music, the legacy of the community continues to thrive, ensuring that its cultural richness remains alive and accessible for generations to come.

These songs transcend entertainment; they act as a vessel for history, identity, and emotional connection. Through her songs, Licursi ensures that the legacy of the Arbëresh community is carried forward. Music, for Licursi, is not just about creating melodies; it is about preserving the essence of a people. Her work serves as a bridge between the generations, keeping the cultural traditions of the Arbëresh alive, even for those who may never have set foot in an Arbëresh village.

### **The Themes of Arbëresh Music**

The themes found in Arbëresh musical traditions range from love, loss, and homeland to religious devotion, social unity, and freedom. Whether performed in intimate family gatherings or public festivals, Arbëresh songs continue to evoke deep emotional ties to the past while offering a space for cultural continuity in the present. In exploring these themes, we gain insight not only into the music itself but also into the worldview and values of a community that has long strived to preserve its unique identity in the face of change.

*Vare Vare* (Licursi) captures both the joys and sorrows of marriage, a key institution in Arbëresh culture. Marriage is not just a personal milestone but a cultural one, linking families and communities. The transition of a woman from

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daughter to wife symbolises the continuity of traditions and the passing down of cultural values. The song's melodies reflect the complexity of these transitions, weaving together the happiness of a new chapter with the bittersweet nature of change and loss.

*Qifti* is a song that symbolises freedom, resilience, and cultural survival. It uses the imagery of a hawk soaring high above the land to represent the strength and perseverance of the Arbëresh people. Despite centuries of migration, hardship, and assimilation, the community continues to retain its unique identity. It celebrates the spirit of the Arbëresh people, reinforcing the idea that even in the face of adversity, their cultural roots remain strong and unbroken.

*E Ikura*, as we have already seen, explores the theme of exile and displacement. This song speaks to the universal pain of leaving one's homeland, bidding farewell to familiar landscapes, and carrying memories of home wherever one goes. The lyrics reflect the sorrow of separation and the enduring ache of homesickness, while also carrying an undercurrent of hope, suggesting that no matter how far one travels, memories of home persist and continue to shape one's identity.

*Nina Nënë* is a lullaby that is passed down through generations. By singing this lullaby to their children, parents instil a sense of connection to their cultural heritage and introduce them to the language and traditions of their ancestors from a very young age.

These songs, along with their continued celebration through festivals and digital platforms, ensure that the Arbëresh cultural and linguistic heritage remains alive and relevant for future generations.

## **Conclusion**

The Arbëresh experience exemplifies how cultural identity, though historically rooted, remains a dynamic and evolving construct—particularly in the digital age. Through music, the Arbëresh community continues to assert its identity, reaffirm

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its values, and resist cultural erasure. Artists like Silvana Licursi play a vital role in this process, transforming traditional songs into emotional conduits that not only recall past struggles but inspire contemporary acts of cultural preservation and pride.

As this study has shown, nostalgia in Arbëresh music—especially in songs like *E Ikura*—is not merely an expression of longing, but a strategy of resilience. It functions as an emotional language through which personal and collective histories are remembered, shared, and carried forward. These songs hold the power to bridge generational and geographical divides, linking elders in Portocannone with young people in diaspora communities around the world.<sup>xx</sup> Music becomes a site of cultural continuity, where identity is both inherited and actively constructed.

Digital platforms amplify this process, transforming private memory into public heritage. They offer Arbëresh people, particularly younger generations, the tools to reconnect with their roots, engage with their language, and reclaim narratives of belonging. Yet, the fragility of the Arbëresh language and the decline in intergenerational fluency remain urgent challenges. Without active efforts to revitalise linguistic and cultural knowledge—through education, emotional engagement, and digital expression—nostalgia may lose its potency as a cultural force.

The Arbëresh case urges us to reconsider the relationship between tradition and technology, emotion and identity. It illustrates how communities can use cultural memory not only to resist assimilation but to reimagine their place in a globalised world. In this way, music is not only a cultural artefact—it is a living, breathing force that enables the Arbëresh people to carry their past into the future. Going forward, scholars, cultural institutions, and local communities must work together to amplify these voices, support digital preservation, and create educational initiatives that connect youth to their linguistic and cultural roots. If identity is a song passed from generation to generation, then the task before us is to ensure the melody continues—unbroken, remembered, and sung anew.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Silvana Licursi is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Arbëresh music. A singer-songwriter deeply connected to her roots, she uses her songs to give voice to the memory, identity, and emotions of the Arbëresh community. Throughout my life, I have had the pleasure of attending some of her live performances, which left a lasting impression on me due to the expressive power and emotional depth of her music. I also had the opportunity to interview her online—a valuable encounter that offered insight into her artistic vision and her commitment to preserving and promoting Arbëresh culture through digital platforms.

<sup>ii</sup> Qifti is an Arbëresh musical group based in Portocannone, in the province of Campobasso, Molise. They define themselves as a “Gruppo di Ricerca Musicale Arbëreshë” (Arbëresh Musical Research Group), dedicated to the preservation and transmission of the Arbëresh musical and linguistic heritage — the variant of Albanian spoken by Italo-Albanian communities in southern Italy. The group is active on Facebook, where they share updates about their musical projects and cultural activities. The word *Qifti* means “the kite” or “the hawk” in both Arbëresh and Albanian, and is also the traditional name for the town of Chieuti (in the province of Foggia, Apulia), another Arbëresh center. A song titled *Qifti* is part of the traditional musical repertoire of Chieuti, as documented in ethnographic studies. In particular, the song *Qifti* has been performed by Angela Dell’Aquila, a teacher and singer from Chieuti, who has devoted her career to teaching Arbëresh songs, stories, and dances to her students, contributing significantly to the preservation of local language and culture. The song *Qifti* has also been reinterpreted by the Arbëresh musical group *Shega* (Dell’Aquila and Villani, *Qifti*, Facebook, “Qifti – YouTube”).

<sup>iii</sup> On this note, I would like to share my own experience as the daughter of an Arbëresh woman who was raised far from her mother's native village, in a large city. I am familiar with the traditional songs, even though I do not speak my mother’s language.

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<sup>iv</sup> These observations stem from my ethnographic research, conducted primarily in 2022. They emerge from conversations with the elderly as well as with people in their fifties, who often reflect on the differences between their generation and that of their children. Some interviews also suggest that, since Albania opened its doors to the Western world following the fall of the Eastern Bloc, both Albanians and Albania itself have shifted from being part of a mythical world to something real. As a result, feelings of nostalgia have diminished.

<sup>v</sup> Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) is a non-profit organization established in 1996, registered in the UK and the US. Its mission is to support, document, protect, and promote endangered languages, with a strong focus on revitalization efforts.

<sup>vi</sup> What follows is the result of my ethnographic fieldwork. Costantina was born in 1940 and is now over 80 years old.

<sup>vii</sup> E. M. was an English language teacher and a part-time researcher. She worked in Italy but also visited Albania on several occasions. These observations are based on my ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>viii</sup> This observation comes from my ethnographic work, where conversations revealed the deep sorrow of witnessing yet another generation of Albanians leaving in search of a new land. Added to this was a sentiment I often encountered—especially among the elderly—that the Albanians who had arrived had lost their traditional customs and the old way of understanding the world.

<sup>ix</sup> These insights also emerged from ethnographic work and interviews—specifically, conversations with members of the Musacchio family in Portocannone and telephone interviews conducted in 2024 with Silvana Licursi. Furthermore, "When I saw the images of the ship overflowing with human beings—shocked and exhausted, as if they had arrived from another planet—I felt a mixture of overwhelming emotion and painful disbelief. Once again, a vessel laden with suffering, fear, and delirious hopes had crossed that stretch of sea on an anguished night, just as it had centuries ago.

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Not Turks at their backs, not burning houses and kidnapped women this time, but a nameless poverty and the humiliation of all human dignity.

‘Brothers’... it is not easy to say this word, to build a bridge over five centuries of separation, to accept a reality so far removed from epic and myth. ‘Brothers – a trembling word in the night – a newly born leaf.’ A story beginning again.” (Licursi, interview).

<sup>x</sup> These reactions were also recorded during my ethnographic research, carried out over several years. In particular, they reflect the comments I received from the Musacchio family of Portocannone.

<sup>xi</sup> Portocannone is a small town located in the Molise region, in the province of Campobasso, with a population of approximately 2,500 inhabitants. Its origins date back to 1046, when it was founded by Latin settlers in the area known as “Castelli,” near the site of the current municipal cemetery. By 1137, the town was referred to as “Portocandesium” (Comune di Portocannone). In 1456, a violent earthquake nearly destroyed the original settlement. A decade later, in 1461, a group of Arbëreshë exiles—Albanian Christians fleeing the Ottoman invasion—rebuilt the town. These settlers brought with them their language and traditions, which still characterize the identity of Portocannone today (Comune di Portocannone).

One of the most significant cultural expressions of this Arbëreshë heritage is the “Carrese,” a traditional ox-cart race held annually on the Monday after Pentecost. According to legend, when the Albanian exiles arrived on the Italian coast, they placed an image of Our Lady of Constantinople on an ox-drawn cart and let the animals choose where to settle. The cart stopped where modern-day Portocannone now stands. This event is commemorated through the Carrese, in which three teams—Giovani (white and light blue), Giovanotti (yellow and red), and Xhuvëntjelvët (orange)—compete for the honor of carrying the statue of Our Lady of Constantinople in the town procession (Comune di Portocannone).

Portocannone also offers a rich architectural heritage. The Porta Urbica di Borgo Costantinopoli is decorated with paintings that depict Arbëreshë customs. The

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Baronial Palace, constructed between 1735 and 1742 by Baron Carlo Diego Cini, reflects the town's aristocratic past. In the historic center, the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, dating back to the 16th century, and the 17th-century Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel are important religious and historical landmarks (Comune di Portocannone).

<sup>xii</sup> I interviewed this person in 2022, so the quote originates from my own ethnographic investigation.

<sup>xiii</sup> These are the major Arbëresh communities in Italy—villages and towns where descendants of Albanian refugees have maintained elements of their language, traditions, and religious practices for centuries.

In Calabria, the Arbëresh presence is especially prominent. Lungro (Ungra) stands out as one of the most important communities, serving as the ecclesiastical center of the Italo-Albanian Church, with its own cathedral and seminary. San Demetrio Corone (Shën Mitri) is another key town, historically known for its educational and religious significance. Civita (Çifti), located on the edge of Pollino National Park, is noted for its stone architecture and active language preservation. Frascineto (Frasnita) is recognized for its strong cultural identity and its vibrant religious festivals following the Byzantine Rite. Other notable villages include San Giorgio Albanese (Mbuzati) and San Cosmo Albanese (Strigàri), which maintain visible traditions in clothing, language, and religious ritual. Acquaformosa (Firmoza) is known for grassroots efforts to safeguard Arbëresh culture, while Plataci (Pllatën) and Spezzano Albanese (Spixan) continue to uphold linguistic and cultural practices.

In Sicily, Piana degli Albanesi (Hora e Arbëreshëvet) is the largest and most culturally vibrant Arbëresh community. It is widely recognized for its elaborate traditional clothing, Byzantine religious services, and public celebrations, especially during Easter. Contessa Entellina (Kundisa), one of the earliest Arbëresh settlements, has preserved much of its linguistic and cultural heritage despite significant population decline. Santa Cristina Gela (Shënd Kristina), near

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Palermo, also retains a strong Arbëresh identity and plays an active role in cultural promotion.

In Basilicata, San Costantino Albanese (Shën Kostandini) and San Paolo Albanese (Shën Pali) are small mountain villages that preserve their heritage through music, language, and traditional events. Barile (Barilli), while more assimilated, still exhibits Arbëresh influence in its customs and is also known for its unique cave-based wine cellars.

In Molise, the villages of Ururi (Rùri), Portocannone (Portkanuni), and Campomarino (Këmarini) are among the last remaining Arbëresh-speaking communities in the region. These towns continue efforts to preserve their distinct cultural identity through schools, festivals, and community engagement.

In Apulia, Chieuti (Qefti) has kept its Arbëresh character alive through religious practices and public celebrations, although the use of the language is diminishing among younger generations.

In Campania, Greci (Katundi) is the only remaining Arbëresh village. It continues to preserve its heritage through festivals and local initiatives, despite ongoing challenges related to cultural and linguistic assimilation.

These communities, though diverse in size and cultural strength, represent the enduring legacy of the Albanian migration to Italy. They remain living examples of resilience, preserving unique linguistic and cultural traditions within the broader Italian context (Bruni).

<sup>xiv</sup> This statement is derived from my ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>xv</sup> At this point, I feel compelled to offer a personal reflection that underscores the complex relationship between language, identity, and cultural transmission. I am Arbëresh on my mother's side, yet, regrettably, I never had the opportunity to fully learn or speak the language. In my household, the dominant language was Italian—the official language of the country—which naturally took precedence in daily communication, education, and public life. As a result, Arbëresh, though present in our heritage, was not actively transmitted to me as a functional means of expression. However, despite these circumstances, I have nonetheless

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developed a meaningful, albeit indirect, connection to it—primarily through music. On weekends, particularly Saturdays and Sundays, it was common for us to listen to traditional Arbëresh songs at home. Over time, through repeated exposure to these songs, I began to internalize certain words and phrases. While I may not be able to construct full sentences or hold a conversation, I have come to recognize the rhythm, tone, and emotional resonance of the language through music. This experience has shown me how powerful music can be as a conduit for cultural memory and linguistic familiarity. It suggests that even in the absence of formal instruction, cultural elements such as music can foster a sense of belonging and maintain a living link to one’s roots.

In this sense, my experience illustrates how music can serve not only as a means of preserving linguistic fragments but also as an emotional bridge between generations—especially for those who, like me, exist in the space between cultural inheritance and linguistic loss.

<sup>xvi</sup> Please look at the following accounts:

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[https://www.instagram.com/arbereshet\\_e\\_italise/](https://www.instagram.com/arbereshet_e_italise/).

@i.am.arbereshe. *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/i.am.arbereshe/>.

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<https://www.facebook.com/albanianinstitute/videos/550826303064333/>.

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<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr31VLGVHfPYtWGuR2HgHSRXE4XGi8PSP>.

<sup>xvii</sup> I spoke with this person during an interview I carried out in 2022, making the quote a direct outcome of my ethnographic work.

<sup>xviii</sup> This individual was part of an interview I conducted in 2022, so the statement reflects findings from my ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>xix</sup> This was a person I interviewed in 2022, and the quote is therefore the result of my ethnographic research.

<sup>xx</sup> The Arbëresh diaspora, traditionally rooted in southern Italy since the 15th century, has also experienced significant waves of emigration to the United States, particularly from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. Faced with economic hardship, land scarcity, and limited opportunities in rural southern regions like Calabria, Basilicata, and Molise, many Arbëresh families left their villages in search of a better life overseas. They settled primarily in urban centres such as New York, Boston, and Detroit, where they joined broader Italian-American communities while attempting to maintain elements of their unique cultural heritage. However, the integration process in the U.S. often led to a gradual erosion of linguistic and cultural practices. While some families preserved oral traditions, culinary customs, and religious rituals, the Arbëresh language and identity were frequently absorbed into the broader Italian-American narrative. Today, descendants of these migrants are rediscovering their heritage through online platforms, cultural events, and musical archives, reconnecting with a past that had long been dormant or forgotten. This renewed interest reflects a broader pattern of second- and third-generation diaspora members seeking to reclaim fragmented aspects of identity that were once sidelined in the pursuit of assimilation.

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