

## Chapter X

Arbëreshë versus Northern Albanian ethnobotany:  
Wild plants for food and medicine in the Vulture  
area (Southern Italy) and in upper Kelmend and  
Shala Valley (Northern Albania)

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### **Introduction**

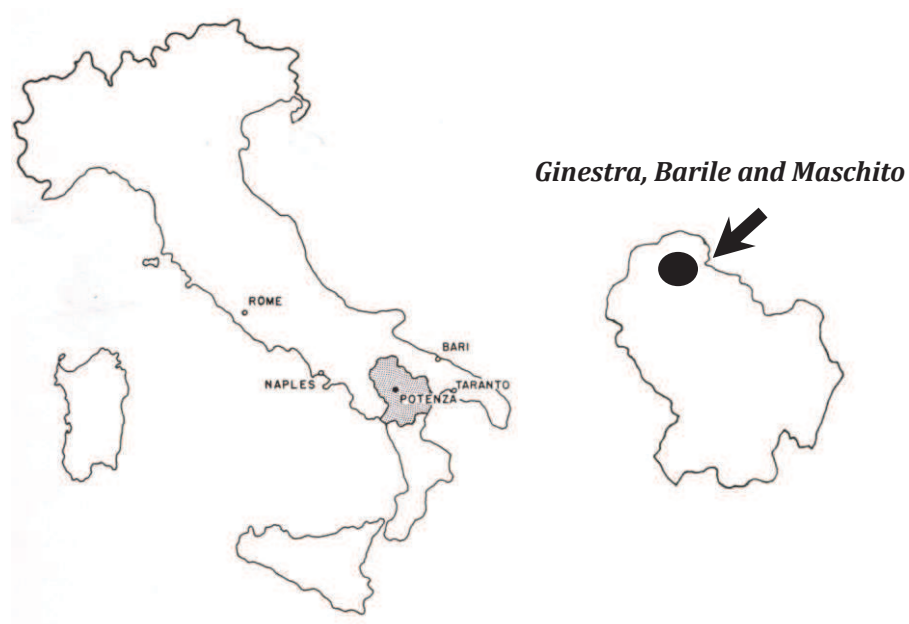
In this brief chapter, we comparatively explore the ethnobotany of the Arbëreshë of the Vulture area (Northern Lucania, Southern Italy) and of the Albanians of the upper Kelmend and upper Shala (Northern Albanian Alps). In doing this, we focus on wild food and medicinal plants, their traditional uses in the aforementioned communities, the potential commonalities between the two ethnobotanical traditions, and possible explanations of these.

Studies which focus on documenting and understanding traditional plant uses among migrants and which “track” these traditions to the country of origin now make up an important sector of modern ethnobotany. One advantage of such migration studies is that they can offer us insight into how traditional plant uses may change across both temporal and spatial continuums. However, very few studies have attempted such an analysis in a systematic way thus far (Vandebroek et al., 2010) and not via literature review of the home countries/regions’ ethnobotany alone (Pieroni et al., 2005; Ceuterick et al., 2008).

### The studied communities

#### *Ginestra, Barile and Maschito, Vulture*

These three small communities (526, 620, and 594 m.a.sl., with approximately 800, 3,000 and 1,800 inhabitants, respectively) are located in the northern part of Basilicata (Southern Italy, Fig. 1) in a territory characterized by the dormant volcano, Monte Vulture. Most of the populations are descended from Arbëreshë Albanians, who arrived in the Monte Vulture area from Albania during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.



**Figure 1.** Location of the studied Arbëreshë communities in Southern Italy

In 1999 these communities, along with all other Arbëreshë people of Southern Italy, were officially recognised as a "historical ethnic mi-

nority" by the Italian Parliament and, later, by a specific legal implementation in the Basilicata regional government. These political measures should ensure a future for the integration of the Arbëreshë language in local schools and should also give the Arbëreshë the legal right to use their idiom in official acts of administration. In addition, this government recognition should also be helpful in promoting measures for sustaining cultural initiatives concerning the defense of their heritage.

Despite all of these plans, only a very small percentage of these descendants in the Vulture area, generally over 70 years old, still retain an active knowledge of the Arbëreshë culture: for example, in the community of Ginestra, it can be estimated that only 10–15 percent of the population is fluent in Arbëreshë Albanian. In Barile, however, the Arbëreshë language seems to be more remarkably alive and it is not uncommon to find young adults who can speak the language.

The original provenience of the Vulture Arbëreshë is still a disputed topic amongst linguists and anthropologists. If in fact their language is classified within the Tosk Albanian group, linguists agree that this grouping is representative of a *Dachsprache*, or dialect continuum encompassing *all* Albanian languages of the Italian diaspora. This does not indicate, however, that the original language of the Arbëreshë of the Vulture area was Tosk, nor that they came from Southern Albania. On the contrary, elderly people of Ginestra have shared oral histories which refer to being descendants of people from Shkëder and coming to Italy from Northern Albania.

#### *Upper Kelmend and upper Shala Valley*

The Albanian communities included in our study are located in the Northern Albanian Alps, in the districts of Malësia, Madhe and Shkëder, respectively (Fig. 2).

The areas are mountainous, with frequent large snowfalls in winter and a landscape characterized by Alpine pastures and beech forests. At 1260 m.a.s.l., Lëpushë is the highest village in Albania. It is also one of the most isolated in the entire Albanian Alps: situated in a small

glacial valley bordering Montenegro. Today, it consists of 25 households, with a total population of approximately 100.



**Figure 2.** Location of the studied communities in Northern Albania

This study also incorporated six settlements of shepherds surrounding Lëpushë (Vajush, Brizhdol, Koprrishti i sirm, Koprrishti poshtëm, Trojan, Dobk) and which are inhabited only during the summertime.

The upper Shala Valley represents the upper valley of the Homonym river: at 670 m.a.sl. Theth is the highest village in the Shala Val-

ley, and is located inside a national park. It is spread along the upper valley and comprises from north to south the settlements of Okol, Nik Gjonaj, Gjecaj, Gjelij, Ndreaj, Nen Rreth, Breisht, Ulaj, Kolaj, and Grunas. Approximately 20 families live in this area throughout the year.

### *Field methods*

Traditional knowledge regarding wild plant uses was assessed in the aforementioned areas using standard ethnobotanical methods including free-listing, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Field methods employed strictly followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the International Society of Ethnobiology and the Italian Association for Ethnological Studies (AISEA). Prior Informed Consent (PIC) was always requested and obtained verbally before each interview, and specific permission for the use of any recording devices (audio or visual) for documentation of ethnobotanical practices was obtained before use. For each wild taxon quoted by an informant, a botanical specimen was collected, its identification was confirmed by the same informant, and taxonomic identification followed the standard *Flora d'Italia* (Pignatti 2002) and *Flora e Shqipërisë* (Paparisto and Qosia, 1988-2000). Voucher specimens of all non-domesticated plants were deposited at the Herbarium of the School of Pharmacy, University of London, and of the Laboratory of Pharmacognosy at the School of Life Sciences of the University of Bradford. Ethnobotanical field studies were carried out in Southern Italy in the spring of 2000, 2001, 2006, and 2008 and in Northern Albania in the summer of 2004, 2005, and 2007.

### **Wild vegetables**

Folk classification of plants and mushrooms as recorded by the elderly people of Ginestra, recognises, among others, one basic life form (as defined by Berlin, 1992) labelled “liakra”, which defines “edible weedy plants”. The word *liakra* is used by the Arbëreshë as a syno-

nym of the South Italian “foglie” (leaves) and surely has an Albanian origin, even though the term does not presently exist in the modern Tosk Albanian language. A similar Albanian term, *lakër*, is however still used today in Albania for defining cabbage [*Brassica oleracea*] and black mustard [*Brassica nigra*] (Sejdiu, 1984). The *liakra* group includes many non-cultivated botanical species, which are commonly gathered and consumed in the Vulture area. Most of the local names of these are not derived from the Italian or South-Italian dialects (Tab. 10/1, Pieroni et al., 2002b), and thus may indicate that these plants were known (and, probably also used) in Albania before migrating to the region in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

Table 1. Most commonly gathered wild vegetables and wild aromatic plants among the Arbëreshë of the Vulture area (Southern Italy)

Botanical taxa	Local folk names	Parts used	Local culinary uses
<i>Amaranthus retroflexus</i> L.	Nen	Leaves	Boiled and fried
<i>Apium nodiflorum</i> (L.) Lag.	Shkafonë Shërpër ta ëmbël, Thundërë	Leaves	Salads or boiled and fried
<i>Asparagus acutifolius</i> L.	Sparengjë, Sparenj, Sparënx	Shoots	Boiled, then fried with eggs
<i>Borago officinalis</i> L.	Vërajnë	Leaves	Boiled and/or fried, special soup with beans ( <i>vërajnë e fazuljë</i> )
<i>Centaurea calcitrapa</i> L.	Drizë	Whorls	Boiled and fried
<i>Chenopodium album</i> L.	Ljabot	Leaves	Boiled and fried

<b>Botanical taxa</b>	<b>Local folk names</b>	<b>Parts used</b>	<b>Local culinary uses</b>
<i>Chondrilla juncea</i> L.	Gjumës, Ngjumës	Whorls and tender shoots	Snack, salads, or boiled and fried
<i>Cichorium intybus</i> L.	Çikour	Whorls	Boiled and fried; traditionally with fava beans ( <i>çikour ma bathë</i> )
<i>Clematis vitalba</i> L.	Kurpër	Shoots	Boiled and fried
<i>Crepis vesicaria</i> L..	Çikoria spertë, Çikorione, Maroljë Marosk, Liakra spertë	Whorls	Boiled and fried
<i>Diploaxis tenuifolia</i> (L.) DC.	Rukol salvaç	Leaves	Salads
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> L. ssp. <i>piperitum</i> (Ucria) Coutinho	Fënoq salvaç, Mbrajnë, Mërajnë	Young aerial parts and fruits	Boiled
<i>Muscari comosum</i> (L.) Mill. (syn. <i>Leopoldia comosa</i> (L.) Parl.)	Çëpuljin ta kuqë	Bulbs	Boiled and fried (after being cut and macerated in cold water overnight)
<i>Lycium europaeum</i> L.	Drizë Krisht, Spinë dë Krisht	Shoots	Boiled and fried
<i>Nasturtium officinale</i> L.	Shërpër, Shërpër ta fortë	Leaves	Salads
<i>Origanum vulgare</i> L. ssp.	Rigan	Flowering	Seasoning

Botanical taxa	Local folk names	Parts used	Local culinary uses
<i>hirtum</i> (Link) Ietswaart ( <i>Origanum heracleoticum</i> auct. non L.)		aerial parts	
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i> L.	Luljëkuq	Whorls	Boiled and fried, special soup with beans ( <i>luljëkuq ma fazuljë</i> )
<i>Picris echioides</i> L.	Sfruzhën Spruzhën	Whorls	Boiled and fried
<i>Reichardia picroides</i> (L.) Roth	Buk, Bukë Ljepër	Whorls	Boiled and fried
<i>Scolymus hispanicus</i> L.	Kardunxheljë , Rëkoljë	Midribs	Boiled, then a special timbale ( <i>verdhët</i> ) <sup>B</sup>
<i>Sinapis arvensis</i> L.	Sënap	Aerial parts	Boiled and fried; special dish at Christmas Eve mit cooked dried stockfish ( <i>sënap e bakala</i> ) or anchovis
<i>Sisymbrium officinale</i> (L.) Scop.	Llapëzan	Whorls	Boiled and fried
<i>Sonchus asper</i> L. and <i>S.</i> <i>oleraceus</i> L.	Rrëshed, Rrësheljë	Young leaves	Boiled and fried
<i>Tordylium apulum</i> L.	Kalkatrinj, Kalkatrizhën ë, Karkallidë	Young leaves	Seasoning
<i>Urtica dioica</i> L.	Hënz, Hinz	Leaves	Boiled



Most of the *liakra* are gathered by elderly women and cooked in mixtures, being boiled and then fried with garlic and chillies (Figs. 3 and 4)



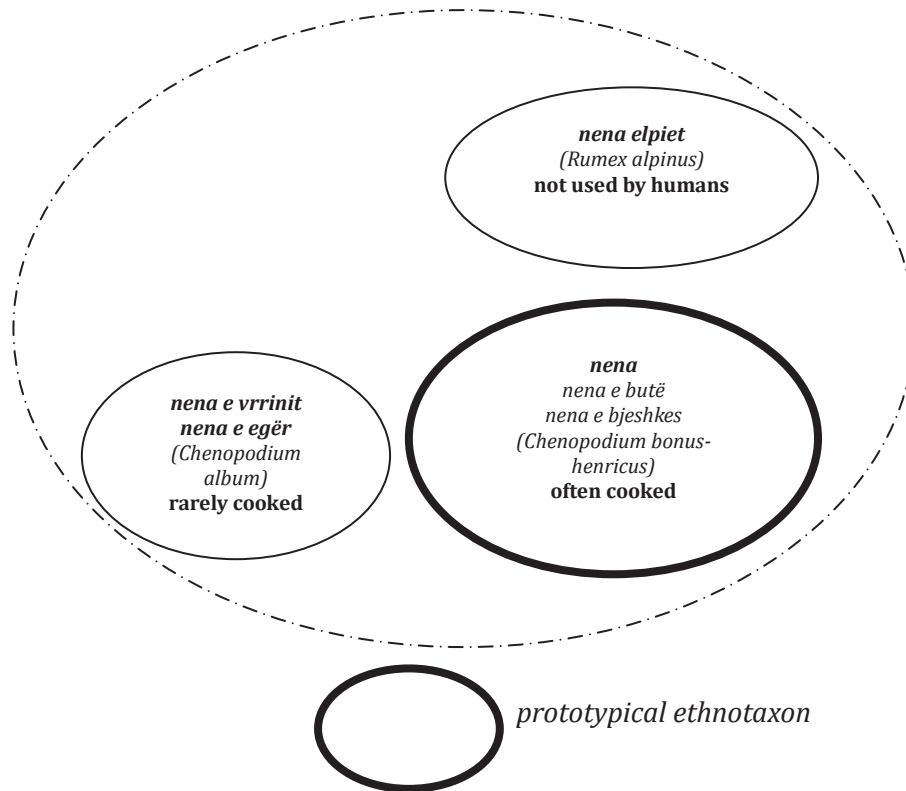
**Figure 3.** “Sinna” showing collected *liakra*



**Figure 4.** Zia Fiorina showing boiled *liakra*

In Northern Albania, however, we could not identify a similar category; locals there also gather only very few wild vegetables (*Urtica dioica*, *Chenopodium album*, *Chenopodium bonus-henricus*, *Allium triquetrum*, Pieroni et al., 2005; Pieroni, 2008).

It is interesting to underline that the term *nen* among the Arbëreshë is used to indicate only *Amaranthus* spp., while in Northern Albania mainly *Chenopodium* species (Fig. 5). The use of boiled/cooked *Chenopodium* and *Urtica* leaves seems to be the only common point between the food ethnobotany of the Vulture area and that of Northern Albania.



**Figure 5.** Representation of the ethnotaxonomy of the label *nena* in the study areas in Northern Albania

### Wild medicinal plants

In Tables 2 and 3 we reported the most commonly used wild medicinal plants documented in the two study sites (Pieroni et al., 2005; Pieroni, 2008).

No special common points could be found between the two ethnobotanies; and this is probably due to the fact that the environment and local flora in the Vulture area are very different from that of the Albanian Alps.

Table 2. Most commonly used wild medicinal plants among the Arbëreshë of the Vulture area

<b>Botanical species</b>	<b>Local folk names</b>	<b>Parts used</b>	<b>Preparations</b>	<b>Uses in the local folk medicine</b>
<i>Agropyron repens</i> L.	Gerris Grisoljë	Rhizomes (dried)	Decoction (also associated with other species)	Diuretic
<i>Arundo donax</i> L.	Kelmr	Internal membrane at node	External application	Haemostatic
<i>Malva sylvestris</i> L.	Mëllagë	Aerial parts	Decoction	For treating sore throat
<i>Marrubium incanum</i> Desr. and <i>M. vulgare</i>	Marruxha	Aerial parts	Decoction	Diuretic, digestive, anti-malarial, panacea
<i>Matricaria recutita</i> L.	Kamomill	Flowering aerial parts	Decoction	Digestive; sedative
<i>Borago officinalis</i> L.	Vërrajnë Vorrask	Aerial parts	Decoction or cooked in a soup as food	Post-partum depurative <sup>#</sup>
<i>Ecballium elaterium</i> (L.) A. Richard	Kukoced salvaç	Fruit juice	External application of the fruit juice	Antiseptic and vulnerary (also in veterinary)
<i>Mercurialis annua</i> L.	Mërkurelja	Aerial parts	Decoction	Laxative (also in veterinary)

Table 3. Most commonly used wild medicinal plants among the Albanians of upper Kelmend and upper Shala Valley (Northern Albania)

<b>Botanical species</b>	<b>Local folk names</b>	<b>Parts used</b>	<b>Preparations</b>	<b>Uses in the local folk medicine</b>
<i>Cornus mas</i> L.	Thana	Fruits (fresh)	Raw or fermented in barrels for 1-2 months, and then distilled to produce <i>raki</i> ( <i>raki thanit</i> )	Eaten raw, as a food medicine to relieve intestinal troubles in children. <i>Raki thanit</i> is considered to be medicinal and is drunk for treating rheumatisms, drunk or rubbed on externally
<i>Gentiana lutea</i> L.	Kshanza	Roots (dried)	Macerate in wild plums distillate ( <i>raki</i> ) or macerate for 1-2 days in cold water; internally	Drunk as preventive against heart diseases
<i>Hypericum maculatum</i> Crantz	Balsam / Caj verdhë / Bar pezmet / Caj bjeshke	Aerial parts (dried)	Decoction	Drunk for treating digestive troubles and diarrhoea (also in veterinary, especially for sheep); for treating stomachaches; as a mild tranquilizer; drunk every morning as a diu-

				retic; for treating flu, sore throat, cough and bron- chitis; as anthelmintic (in veterinary: calves)
<i>Lilium mart- agon</i> L.	Bar tamthi	Bulbs	Decoction	to treat every liver disease (also in veteri- nary)
<i>Origanum vul- gare</i> L.	Caj malhit	Flow- ering aerial parts	infusion	originally used to treat cough; nowadays drunk as a recreational beverage, and also as diuretic and digestive Drunk regularly throughout the year as a "social beverage" and also specifically for treating sore throats and colds (especially in children). Also gathered, dried and sold to the city markets
<i>Phyllitis scolopendrium</i> (L.) Newman (Aspleniaceae)	Bar mush- knisë	leaves, fresh	decoction	to treat every respiratory and lung affections
<i>Plantago ma- jor</i> L.	Deiça	Leaves		MED: Used ex- ternally as a haemostatic and suppurative on-

				wounds. In infusions for treating abdominal pains. In the past, gathered, dried and sold to the city markets
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> L.	Boronica	fruits, dried	decoction; cooked in syrup and jams; macerated in wild plum distillate ( <i>raki</i> )	to treat intestinal troubles; anti-diarrhoeic; "to strengthen the stomach" and the eyes (especially in children); "blood cleansing" Eaten raw or in infusions ( <i>caj</i> ). Also eaten as dried fruit for treating sore throats or for relieving digestive troubles

### Conclusion

Comparative ethnobotanical studies that analyze traditional plant uses of diasporas and of their country/area of origin are crucial for understanding how people adapt to new environments in the face of migration (both forced and voluntary). However, studies concerning old migrations and diasporas can be very complex, as is the case of the Vulture Arbëreshë, when there are no historical records detailing the exact location of their point of origin. Nevertheless, much insight can be gained from such studies, as they can be used to explore the ways in which mankind adapts to novel ecosystems through the use of traditional knowledge.