

# CHAPTER 3

## Wild Food Plants and Arbëresh Women in Lucania, Southern Italy

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Traditional knowledge, use and management of wild food plants in the Mediterranean are neglected areas of inquiry, as are culinary traditions and, specifically, women's knowledge. But these are crucial to maintaining both cultural and biological diversity in the region. Ethnic Albanian women living in three villages in an inland area of southern Italy have, for centuries, maintained culinary traditions based upon wild plants and have transmitted traditional knowledge (TK)<sup>1</sup> of these plants across generations. Wild plant gathering and gift giving represent important elements of women's village social networks and a source of status and authority for women. Wild plant foods further represent a symbolic component of cultural identity that women perpetuate through ritual foods associated mainly with religious events. Traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) about wild plants also reflects the dynamics of exchange between the indigenous South Italian culture and the 'imported' Albanian culture both in terms of language and in terms of cuisine. Italian culture has had a strong influence on the Arbëresh diet, but the reverse is not true. Many Arbëreshë have rejected self-recognition of their cultural and ethnic roots as Italian authorities and the media have made this recognition very difficult. Phenomena such as emigration and wage labour employment have also contributed to the loss of cultural traditions and wild plant TEK. For the first time in centuries, younger women have lost their mothers' and grandmothers' wild plant knowledge and, with it, the status and authority that these older women enjoy. Re-instilling lost TEK will require time and will be heavily dependent upon the positive acceptance by the younger generations of the knowledge connected with the elderly female cosmos.

### **Traditional Plant Knowledge in the Mediterranean**

There has been much research on traditional phytotherapy (the use of plants for medicinal purposes) in many Mediterranean areas, especially due to the interest of a few research centres in its potential applications in the pharmaceutical field. These studies often tend to 'extract' the heritage of medical knowledge from its

complex socio-cultural origins and to shift it into large-scale bio-scientific evaluation circuits in a process better known as *bioprospecting*.

On the other hand, ethnobiological studies of edible plants aim to stimulate a 're-instillation' of lost knowledge and practices in the studied areas with respect to the original cosmologies (Heinrich and Gibbons 2001). They offer a wonderful opportunity to genuinely evaluate TEK as well as the distribution and nature of TEK among the sexes. Not all forms of knowledge are equally valued within society, and 'male' forms of knowledge are often privileged over 'female' forms (Parpart 1995; Kothari and Turner in this volume). Accordingly, domains involving the use of plants in traditional contexts that are mainly managed by women are often perceived as not scientifically relevant and are classified as 'folklore'. This is certainly the case for food herbs and even more so for plants used in traditional handicrafts and in religious and ritual ceremonies.

Traditional plant knowledge in Southern Europe has been the subject of several detailed surveys that have primarily focused on natural health remedies (mainly medicinal plants).<sup>2</sup> Very little attention has been given to Mediterranean people's traditional gathering of wild and weedy plants for food or to local culinary traditions (Forbes 1976; Paoletti *et al.* 1995; Pieroni 1999a). Also, with the exception of a few ethnobotanical surveys,<sup>3</sup> there has been no recent research on non-food and non-medicinal uses of plants. In the very sparse data that exists on TEK and on *gendered* TEK dynamics in the ethnobotanical literature on the Mediterranean, it becomes clear, for example, that wild vegetables and weedy greens are mainly recognized, gathered and processed by women, whereas the collection of bulbs and mushrooms is generally a male activity (Pieroni 1999a; Ertuğ this volume).

A basic role in the evolution of TEK is played by its means of transmission from one generation to another and among sexes, as well as across different ethnic groups. The survival of the complex socio-cultural mechanisms that make this transmission of knowledge possible strongly affects the types and forms of TEK that are passed along (see also Turner, this volume). There is a strong connection between TEK loss and loss of the original language that occurs with acculturation within a social environment that is influenced by a dominant culture and language (see, for example, Zent 2001 on the Piaroa of Venezuela). Precise changes in ethnobotanical competence occur between generations, and can correspond to the foundation of permanent villages and the beginning of settled, integrated and acculturated lifestyles (see also Hoffmann this volume). This could suggest that, in the presence of important turning points in local communities, TEK is dramatically affected. A similar process also took place with the disappearance of the traditional ethnic Albanian agricultural society during the 1960s and 1970s in Lucania in southern Italy.

Ethnobiological research in the Mediterranean has focused on making lists of plants used by local people, but very rarely has there been any attempt to investigate how plant TEK is distributed by age and sex, how it evolves, and which social and cultural dynamics influence these processes. The aim of this chapter is

to discuss the results of a gender-sensitive study of the traditions related to wild and weedy food herbs<sup>4</sup> in three small ethnic Albanian (Arbëresh) communities in northern Lucania (southern Italy).<sup>5</sup> This survey was focused on traditional gathering, processing and cooking of non-cultivated ('wild') vegetables, as well as on local perceptions of these plants (how people classify, categorize, and perceive them by smelling and tasting), and the cultural mores associated with them, and on knowledge transmission and social dynamics affecting this process.

## The Arbëreshë and Their Environment

The Arbëreshë are descendants of Albanians who emigrated in several flows from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries to diverse central and southern Italian inland areas (Dessart 1982). At present, it is estimated that there are no more than 80,000 Albanian-speakers, all of whom are bilingual in Italian and Arbëresh Albanian, but it is probable that the true number is much lower owing to acculturation. For example, in the predominantly Arbëreshë village of Ginestra, it is estimated that only 15–20 per cent of the current population can actively communicate using the Arbëresh Albanian language.

Arbëresh Albanian belongs to the Tosk Albanian subgroup, which represents the only surviving language from the ancient Paleo-Balkan group (Illyrian, Messapic and Thracian) of the Indo-European family (Grimes 2000). Arbëresh Albanian is classified as an 'endangered language' (Salminen 1999). Today in the (oral) dictionary of the Arbëresh language, more than 40 per cent of the words are Italian. It was only in December 1999 that the Arbëreshë – together with 11 other non-Italian-speaking groups – obtained official recognition by the Italian Parliament as an 'historical ethnic minority'. This should ensure a future for their language in local schools and should also give the people the legal right to use their language in official acts and cultural initiatives to defend their heritage (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana 1999).

The Arbëresh culture represents a wonderful example of a long intercultural exchange between an indigenous culture (South Italian) and an 'imported' culture (Albanian). This exchange has involved not only the language, but also many other aspects of social life that have probably influenced both TEK and the uses to which gathered food weeds are put.

The northern part of the Lucania region (also called Basilicata) is located in an area dominated by a former volcano: the Monte Vulture. It is characterized by a few villages sustained primarily by pastoralism and agriculture and, more recently, by a car factory that was constructed in the nearby urban centre of Melfi. The countryside is dotted with cultivated olive groves and vineyards producing a local variety that gives the name to the local wine (Aglianico). Since the 1970s the cultivation of durum wheat (*Triticum durum*) as a cash crop has become increasingly important, and the area in cultivation has significantly increased.

The Arbëreshë arrived in the Vulture area, as we have seen, during diverse immigration flows beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century. Today,

three Arbëresh villages survive: Ginestra (whose inhabitants are called in Arberësh *Zhurian*), Barile (in Arberësh *Barilli*), and Maschito (in Arberësh *Mashqiti*), with around 700, 3,000 and 1,800 inhabitants respectively (see Table 3.1). These villages are quite isolated from the bulk of the Arbëresh communities, which are concentrated in Calabria and Sicily, and are also isolated from the other few Albanian ethnic enclaves in southern Lucania: Apulia, Campania, Molise, and Abruzzo.

In Ginestra and Maschito, a very distinct cultural gap exists between generations, and today only the oldest members of the population are able to speak Arbëresh Albanian. The majority of the middle-aged (35–55 years) population recall some words and basic customs from their Arbëresh ancestry, but do not incorporate these facets of traditional life into their daily life. ‘Modernization’ – conformity to mainstream Italian culture – is marked among the population aged 35 years and younger. For the most part, this group has abandoned the traditional agro-pastoralist way of life and instead depends primarily on factory employment. In Barile, the linguistic heritage has not yet been lost and, at present, a few members of the younger generation speak Arbëresh.

An important chapter in the history of the Arbëresh communities of the Vulture area in the twentieth century is represented by emigration. During the 1950s and 1960s, nearly half of the entire male population left their villages and found jobs in the Piedmont of northern Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland, at times accompanied by their families. Those who left their families behind generally returned after a few years. This phenomenon has been central to the cultural changes occurring in the Arbëresh villages. Arbëresh men who emigrated abroad or to northern Italy did so together with many south-Italian-speaking men and a kind of standardized southern Italian became the language commonly in use in the emigrant communities.

Fieldwork was conducted in Ginestra, Maschito and Barile during April–June, August and November 2000, and March–July 2001. Ethnobotanical information was collected from 68 informants (49 women and 19 men) who retain TEK, using semi-structured and structured interviews. Most interviewees were more than 50 years old, and were mainly from families that still have a strong connection with traditional agricultural activities.

People were asked to describe precisely the methods for processing and cooking each *folk species*<sup>6</sup> that they had mentioned in the previous phase of research. Several fresh plant specimens or dried samples were collected during the field study, and were shown to the interviewees in order to test their ability to recognize the plants and confirm their applications.

Each wild and weedy plant species that the informants identified as used for food was collected and identified, applying nomenclature that follows the standard botanical work for Italian flora (Pignatti 1982). Voucher specimens of all the non-domesticated (wild and weedy) greens were collected and are deposited at the Herbarium of the Centre for Pharmacognosy and Phytotherapy of the School of Pharmacy, University of London.

## Gathering *Liakra* among the Arbëreshë

Traditions related to gathering and cooking wild food plants are very popular in the Vulture area. More than 110 botanical taxa were identified that Arbëresh women use as food in their local culinary traditions, including about 50 non-cultivated species (Pieroni and Heinrich 2002, Pieroni *et al.* 2002a). Among wild and weedy plants, all Arbëresh women who were interviewed clearly distinguish between *liakra* (edible weedy vegetables) and *bara* (non-edible grasses and herbs). *Liakra* is used by the Arbëreshë as a synonym for 'leaves' and has an Albanian origin, even though the term no longer exists in the modern Tosk Albanian language.

Elderly Arbëreshë women remember that they used to collect *liakra* before returning home after spending the entire day working in the fields, especially while weeding fields in the spring. They removed weeds from the cultivated areas and brought home and cooked those that were edible. *Liakra* were sometimes gathered and consumed for lunch directly in the fields *all'acita* (with salt, olive oil and vinegar).

Today, the main gatherers are elderly women who normally collect wild greens on their own. Young green aerial sections of *liakra* are the most commonly gathered plant parts; they are usually dug up with a knife and stored in a plastic bag. Women collect *liakra* mainly in the ecozones located very close to the village, for example, in the *vrështë* (vineyards or olive groves) or in their proximity. A few species are also collected from hedgerows (*gardhë*). Gathering areas are today much more restricted than in the past, and all women gatherers are very concerned about the current use of pesticides in the durum wheat fields, and about the fact that their 'safe' spaces for collecting *liakra* are constantly decreasing.

Generally men collect a very few wild plants from the ecozones located further from the village surrounding wheat fields (*dheju*) and in the secondary forests (*pill*): these include tassel hyacinth (*Leopoldia comosa*) bulbs and a couple of mushroom species (*Pleurotus eryngii* and *Pholiota aegerita*). Men were attempting to semi-domesticate a very few non-domesticated species in homegardens (*kopshtë*), such as wild oregano (*Origanum heracleoticum*), Spanish salsify (*Scolymus hispanicus*), and tassel hyacinth. Gathering of these species is generally very time-consuming since they grow in areas located far from the village (this is why they are primarily gathered by men), and their natural abundance is limited. About half of these weedy greens are sold informally in local open-air markets in the nearby (Italian-speaking) villages of Rionero and Venosa.

## Processing and Cooking *Liakra*

In the past, *liakra* were often eaten as snacks during fieldwork. More often they were brought home, washed at the village fountain, and then boiled in the traditional terracotta pot (*poq*). In the poorest families they were eaten raw with bread, without oil and salt. Today, very few *liakra* are eaten raw. Commonly, they are lightly boiled and then fried in olive oil together with garlic and, sometimes, a

few hot chile peppers. The cooked greens are then added to boiled pasta as a kind of green vegetable sauce. In some cases, these weedy greens are boiled together with the pasta, and the entire preparation is fried in olive oil with garlic. Pasta with *liakra* is often considered to be a main dish. In some other cases, the wild species are cooked and consumed with bean soup. This is the case with the traditional preparations *luljĕkuq e fazuljĕ* ('corn poppy leaves [*Papaver rhoeas*], and beans'), or *bathĕ e ĉikour* ('mashed fava beans [*Vicia faba*] and wild chicory [*Cichorium intybus*']), or they are eaten in a kind of soup (*mĕnĕstra maritatĕ*) prepared with mixtures of more than ten wild herbs. *Liakra* are only rarely used to prepare special meals for feast days. On Christmas Eve, anchovies or dried fish are traditionally served with boiled and fried shoots of broccoli raab that are semi-cultivated in the area (*ĉim de rrapĕ*, *Brassica rapa* ssp. *rapa* [DC] Metzg. [Group Ruvo Bailey], syn.: *Brassica rapa* L. Broccolotto Group), or of wild mustard (*sĕnap*, *Sinapis* sp. pl.). During Easter, a kind of pie (*verdhĕt*) is prepared with eggs, lamb, ricotta, sheep cheese and (previously boiled) leaf stalks of *Scolymus hispanicus*; in the village of Maschito, the young aerial parts of wild fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* spp. *piperitum*) are used instead.

A special processing method is used only for *Leopoldia comosa* bulbs. These bulbs have a very strong bitter taste when eaten raw, and so are peeled and soaked in cold water overnight or even over several days before being fried or pickled. Women use this procedure 'to decrease the bitterness', but this is to improve taste rather than to detoxify the plant. Recently, in a few recipes, *liakra* are sometimes replaced by cultivated vegetables (in particular, beet, *Beta vulgaris*) that are bought in the market or cultivated in homegardens.

## Culinary Traditions and Acculturation

There has surely been an exchange over a long period of ArbĚresh and southern Italian women's knowledge of the culinary use of wild vegetables. A strong acculturation process took place in the ArbĚresh centres from the 1960s onwards, when streets were improved and exchanges with other nearby southern Italian communities began to be very intense. Italian-speaking officers and civil servants arrived in the villages as local elementary schools or post offices were established, or when electricity or a sewage system was installed. This process slowly began to affect local cuisine.

Today's daily ArbĚreshĕ diet doesn't differ substantially from that of neighbouring Italian communities. When comparing traditional ArbĚresh women's cuisine in Ginestra, Barile and Maschito with that of Italian women living in Ripacandida, only a few differences are evident. Some distinct species of *liakra* (or *foglie*, as they are called in the Southern Italian dialect in Ripacandida) are gathered and, when the same plants are used, they are used in different culinary preparations. Table 3.1 lists the most salient differences between the four villages. Italian cuisine has had a strong influence on the ArbĚresh diet, but very few traces of the inverse trend (Italians adopting ArbĚresh dishes) can be found: the already

Table 3.1: Comparison between Arbëresh and Southern Italian Cuisine in Four Centres

	Ginestra (Zhurian)	Barile (Barilli)	Maschito (Mashqiti)	Ripacandida
Altitude	564 m	600 m	595 m	620 m
Ethnic group	Arbëreshë	Arbëreshë	Arbëreshë	Italian
Immigration flows	1470–1478	1470–1478 1533–1534 1534, 1664	1470–1478	—
Population 1998	734	3398	1928	1834
Change population 1991–8	–6.3	+4.17	–1.2	–11.5
% population 65+	25.6%	22.5%	24.1%	27.8%
Current Arbëresh speakers	10–15%	35–40%	5–10%	0%
<i>Liakra/foglie</i> gathering and culinary use of aerial parts of <i>nen</i> ( <i>Amaranthus</i> <i>retroflexus</i> ) and <i>ljabot</i> ( <i>Chenopodium album</i> )	✓	✓	✓	—
Wild greens used in the <i>verdhët</i> (kind of timbale) on Easter Day	kardunxheljë ( <i>Scolymus</i> <i>hispanicus</i> )	rekuljë ( <i>Scolymus</i> <i>hispanicus</i> )	mërajnë ( <i>Foeniculum</i> <i>vulgare ssp.</i> <i>piperitum</i> )	Without any vegetables
Wild greens used in <i>liakra e fazuljë</i> (weeds and bean soup)	luljëkuq ( <i>Papaver</i> <i>rhoeas</i> )	luljëkuq ( <i>Papaver</i> <i>rhoeas</i> )	vërajnë ( <i>Borago</i> <i>officinalis</i> )	None
<i>Dorzëtë</i> (very thin home-made semolina spaghetti, cooked in milk and eaten on Catholic Ascension Day)	✓	—	—	—

mentioned *verdhët* (*verdhët* from the Albanian *verdhë*, in English 'yellow', perhaps due to the large amount of eggs used in this festival dish) is, for example, also popular in the nearby Italian villages (Rionero, Ripacandida, Venosa). A mutual exchange of experiences and culinary knowledge between Arbëresh and Italian women has been hindered due to the dominance of mainstream Italian culture. Historically and partly still today, the Arbëreshë have rejected self-recognition of their cultural and ethnic roots. This has surely recently been reinforced by the

negative perspective portrayed by the media and the majority of the Italian population concerning the immigrant flows from Albania since 1991, and has represented a constant dynamic in collective Arbëresh psychology.

### ***Liakra* in Arbëresh Women's Social Context**

Women once gathered *liakra* as they returned home from working in the fields in a sort of collective moment, as they sang together. Gathering is no longer a shared experience but, once *liakra* are gathered, they still represent an important element of women's village social networks: they are often the objects of gift giving, especially for older female neighbours. Elderly women agree that spontaneous gift-giving relations are declining, while the logic of market forces has become more pervasive and tends to replace the free exchange of goods among people as a community custom. The gift-giving dynamic is very complex and may be connected with beliefs about the 'evil eye' (envy possession).

Gallini (1973) discussed in detail the relationship between envy and possession in terms of redistribution mechanisms among social classes in Italy. The Vulture area population believes that, if one is complimented on a possession and this compliment is not followed by the response '*abbenedica*' ('that God will bless you'), the evil eye could afflict the owner of the admired possession. In order to avoid this, the possessor is then forced to share (if it is sharable) the envied object with the admirer. Gathered plants are often offered as gifts, even those plants that are considered to be rare and precious such as wild asparagus (*Asparagus acutifolius*), *Scolymus hispanicus*, *Leopoldia comosa* and mushrooms.

In the villages visited, people generally considered 'rare' species (see also Price this volume) to be those that are found only in special places (mainly not close to the village), whose gathering is very time-consuming, or that are fast-growing (so that the period when the plant is edible is very short). Significantly, it is mainly men who gather these particularly rare species (together with wild oregano), perhaps because they are 'rare' (although it could also be that they are 'rare' because only men gathered them). It is interesting to note that at least three of these four species are by far the most expensive in the open-air local markets and, even though women sell them, usually only men gather them. It could be hypothesized that, by this mechanism, men could gain a kind of further recognition (and power) for their economically 'fruitful' task. Moreover, it was difficult to speak with elderly men about food greens and weeds, with the exception of these four items that they considered as the only 'serious things' gathered, because they are economically very valuable.

Giving gifts of gathered *liakra* is always a female prerogative and decisions in this regard can usually only be made by the oldest woman in the household.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, men perhaps cannot avail themselves of the authority that accompanies gift giving in the community, but this could be compensated for by the authority they gain within the household when they make these plants available to older women for exchange.



## Gendering TEK around Wild Herbs

Qualitatively, it is easy to point out that old women, as the principal wild plant gatherers, have the most extensive knowledge about weedy food greens. But, since it is also necessary to analyse TEK dynamics quantitatively among generations, 60 persons (24 men and 36 women) in Ginestra were asked to identify fresh specimens of eight locally used non-cultivated plants: four vegetables (wild chicory, *Cichorium intybus*; wall rocket, *Diplotaxis tenuifolia*; tassel hyacinth, *Leopoldia comosa*; and sow thistle, *Sonchus oleraceus*); three medicinal plants (giant reed, *Arundo donax*; mallow, *Malva sylvestris*, and white horehound *Marrubium vulgare*); and one herb that is considered among the Arbëreshë to be a prototypical food-medicinal herb (borage, *Borago officinalis*).

First, any interpretation of the cultural significance of age with respect to ethno-biological knowledge and competence is necessarily complicated by the fact that, in any cultural context, age is naturally associated with learning and accumulation of TEK. A few considerations can in any case be suggested on the basis of the recorded data.

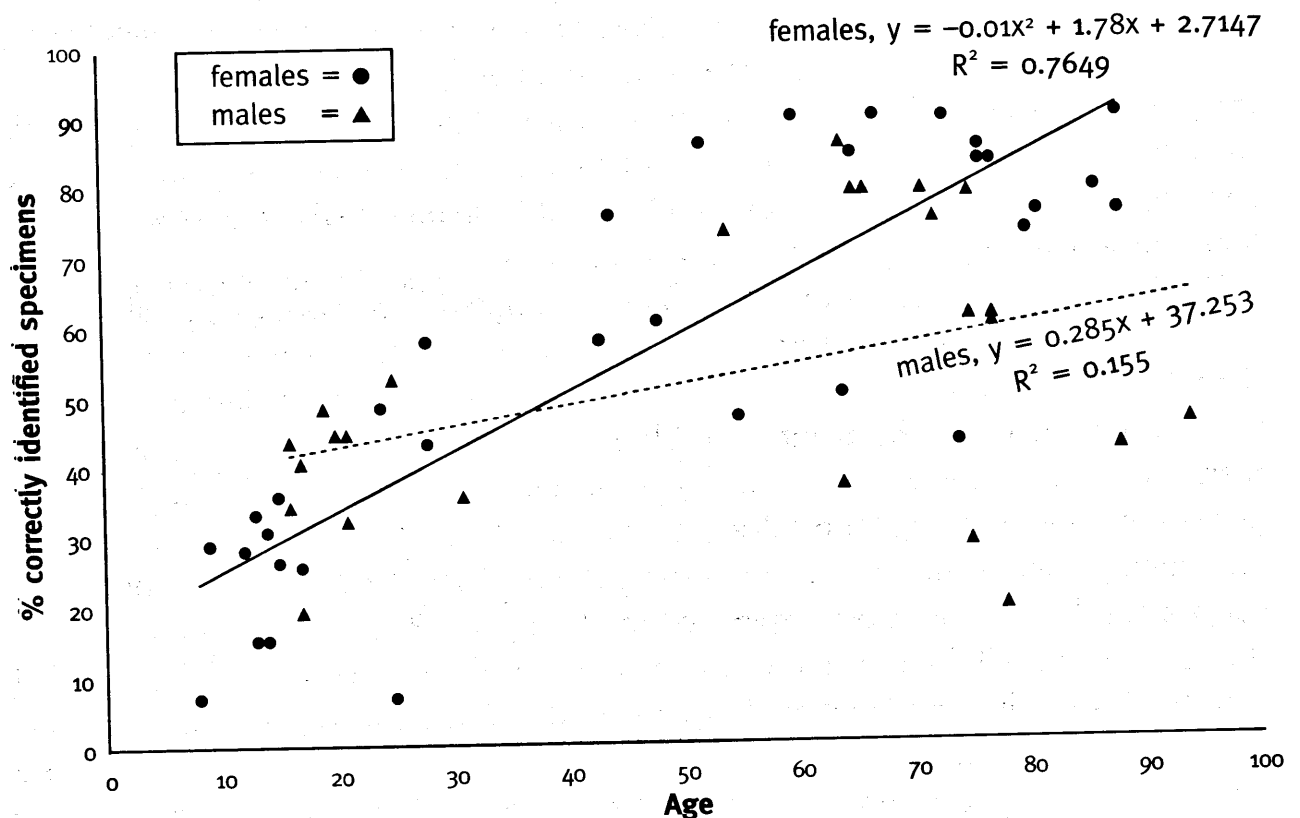


Figure 3.1: Distribution of TEK of Non-cultivated Plants by Sex and Generation in Ginestra (n=60) using a Linear or Binomial Regression Model

Figure 3.1 presents results of a linear regression of the capability to correctly identify the eight specimens relating age and sex as independent variables. The small differences among male and female trends are due to the fact that the chosen specimens are very commonly used plants. These plants were chosen because less

common species could be recognized exclusively by women, while with these specimens it was easier to detect differences among generations, which could decrease the effect of age as a variable associated with the learning processes.<sup>8</sup>

The ability to identify a plant dramatically decreases among both men and women under age 50, even though women seem to be much more affected. Although young village men now usually work in factories, they also still work in the fields in grape, wine and olive production during weekends or holidays. The younger women, however, have completely lost their mothers' and grandmothers' knowledge: they work in the fields neither daily nor during their free time. Their younger male partners sometimes gather wild plants themselves or at least are more exposed than their wives to other people (elderly women) who gather plants.

In Ginestra, both for women and for men, the loss of TEK seems to correlate with the loss of the ability to speak the ethnic language: this has mostly affected people, particularly males, born in and after the 1940s (personal observation). As Mühlhäusler recently stated (2001: 143), there is 'an important aspect to any type of management: one can manage only what one knows; and a corollary: that one knows that for which one has a linguistic expression'. Yet it also became clear from the analysis of questionnaires that the loss of TEK and of the Arbëresh language are not necessarily associated: a few middle-aged interviewees are able to remember Arbëresh names of plants, but can't identify them or explain their traditional use.

When analysing the same recorded ethnobotanical competence by means of a curvilinear regression model, in this case among the men, the percentage of correctly identified plants reaches a maximum for those aged between 50 and 60 years; strangely, it decreases for those older than 60. This trend might be explained by the fact that most of the male population over age 65 consists of people who emigrated in search of work, often returning to the village many years later. In Ginestra, the emigration that had its major peak at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s has certainly contributed to TEK loss, removing a generation of men from working contact with the natural environment on a regular basis. When these same men returned home, moreover, they began to work in factories rather than in agriculture. They also seem to have played a role in the positive internalization of the acculturation process and in the adoption of mainstream Italian/European cultural models. Among them are many who still tend to reject Arbëresh cultural practices. In opposition to this group of men there are elderly women who try actively to maintain the uniqueness of their culture through continued involvement in gathering weedy greens and preparing traditional meals.

Another demographic group that has certainly played a role in this process is made up of the emigrant families of the middle generation – those who left southern Italy during the 1980s to move to northern Italy, and normally come back to visit their parents or relatives in the summer. Among these people, perhaps partly because of negative media images of recent immigrant flows from Albania, the rejection of traditional culture is very strong. A man from this group tried to convince his interviewer that traditional Albanian culture is something that has to

be hidden, because 'Albanians, after all, are like gypsies' (gypsies have a strongly negative connotation among ethnic Italians).

On the other hand, all of the Arbëresh villages visited had contacts with Albanians from Albania and Kosovo over the past decades, with cultural exchange and mutual visits that involved many people, and that were sustained by local municipalities. This occurred at a time when informal cultural exchanges with 'communist' Albania were very rare all over the world. Paradoxically, after the political upheaval in Albania in 1991, these contacts ended, and no interest remained in Ginestra to keep this tradition alive.

In the past, women taught their daughters how to identify the edible plants that had to be gathered while they worked in the field. This was a kind of learning by experience, where daughters observed gestures renewed daily during the spring and summer seasons. Today this mechanism of passing on cultural knowledge has broken down (see also Turner this volume). Young women no longer go into the fields but instead work at home or in factories in the surrounding areas, and do not gather wild edibles. Moreover, nutritional patterns have changed in the studied area. Young couples are now accustomed to eating meat every day and, for most of them, *liakra* represent only a kind of sporadic 'exotic' variation that is mainly prepared and provided by an elderly female (usually the mother or mother-in-law).

## Dietary Traditions as Sources of Symbols and Cultural Identity

'Food is a product and mirror of the organization of society ... a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena' (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997: 6). Social changes and modernization also affect food processing, storage, cooking, food habits and social relations (Counihan 1997, see also Malaza this volume). Food, then, is not only nourishment: in the study area, food botanicals represent central elements of the most important religious procession of the Catholic Holy Friday, the *processione della zingara di Barile* (Procession of the Gypsy of Barile). In this traditional procession, which is witnessed by all Arbëreshë (and southern Italians) in the Vulture area, in addition to the classical representations of the Christian tradition, a few typical Arbëreshë characters are also present. Among them, the most important is the 'gypsy lady' (*la zingara*), who is dressed in traditional costume, covered by all the (real!) gold jewels previously collected from all the families in the village. She symbolizes the temptations of Christ and, in the procession, everyone throws dried and roasted chickpeas (*Cicer arietinum*) at her. In Arbëreshë symbolism, the chickpea is considered to be 'negative' because it is believed that the sounds of its pods shaking led to the discovery of Jesus Christ during his flight to Egypt.

Another example of a ritual use of food is the dish prepared for All Souls' Night (1 November). For this occasion, elderly Arbëreshë women of Ginestra customarily boil durum wheat in grape juice (*mër kot*), adding pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) as a good omen. A bowl of this preparation is left outside the window as an offering to all the souls of Purgatory who, during the night, 'should come and eat it'. A third

example is provided by the bread baked for Saint Biagio's Day (3 February): it is blessed in the Church and then eaten as a preventive for sore throats.

Culinary tradition is a popular sign of cultural identity: since 1999, for example, Ginestra's 'Pro-Loco' (the local association dedicated to promoting cultural initiatives in the village) has organized a 'festival of the typical Arbëresh kitchen'. This big feast, which takes place in the second week of August in the village *piazza*, is the result of the collective work of the whole community and especially of women. Days before, they prepare a full range of traditional dishes for the village, for visitors from nearby centres, and also for relatives who have emigrated to northern Italy and are on holiday at that time in Ginestra. This gastronomic event, of a kind quite common over the past several years in many rural areas of Italy, is a distinctive sign of the search for symbols of common identity. The result may be more 'folkloristic' than authentic folklore: many dishes presented during the festival are seen and sold as 'typical', even when they are not at all distinctive of Arbëresh traditional cuisine. As Bausinger noted: 'Folklorism is the applied version of the folklore of yesterday' (2001: 147).

While the loss of TEK has certainly contributed to the decline in the culinary use of weeds among the Arbëreshë, culinary traditions in turn play an important role in the retention of TEK. Food, food preparation and the sociability related to food directly reflect Arbëresh cultural identity. Losing these cultural traditions would certainly result in the loss of TEK and of plant gathering traditions as well.

## **Women and Ethnobotanical Competence: Knowledge as a Source of Authority and Power**

Everyone who holds valued expertise in a specific domain receives status in a given social context (Code 1991). Elderly Arbëresh community members are respected and consulted as authorities: a distinctive sign of this is the fictive kinship terms that everyone in the village still uses when speaking with them: 'aunt' (*zia*) and 'uncle' (*zio*). The *zia*, especially, has a strong influence on the acquisition and use of traditional knowledge in household food and medicinal practices. In this latter domain, information is sometimes kept secret, only partially transmitted or transmitted only to special persons like particular relatives, as in the case of ritual healing by prayers (see Quave and Pieroni 2002).

The authority of these women is strong in the village whereas, by contrast, the younger female generation seems to have lost such a position, leading to a very significant change in the distribution of power within the village. From the authority of the *zie* a long series of social responsibilities is derived: managing gathering activities, organizing homegardening and cooperating with men in agricultural decisions (although these remain the final prerogative of the male community). Bearing almost total responsibility for the domestic domain and, in particular, for the kitchen, elderly women were accustomed to directing everyday life in the household. Moreover, as healers and – related to this – as religious practitioners, they played a central role in the village's ritual and religious sphere.

Today, of all these sources of authority, nothing remains in the hands of the younger generation of women. Their male partners make all decisions concerning work in the fields and their role at home is weaker than before. While all men consult the *zia* about health problems, young women are not considered able to provide such advice. Moreover, they generally do not manage homegardens (keeping only a few flowers on the balcony): they are still 'queens' of the kitchen, but the majority have lost the knowledge associated with traditional cuisine. In some ways, they no longer have the same authority as their mothers or grandmothers had: this is perhaps the price they have had to pay for greater economic independence. If this new situation is partially accepted by their male partners, it is generally rejected by the older generation (both male and female), which at times produces deep conflicts between the generations within families. On the other hand, the majority of the young women have attended school. It seems then that their mothers' and grandmothers' TEK has been replaced by formal education without the latter having the same social implications as the former (see also Turner, this volume). At present, young Arbëresh women are very conscious of their muted role in the family and of the broader independence (both economic and psychological) that they have finally attained. In the many open discussions that were held with young women in the Vulture area, the majority automatically rejected a role exclusively confined to domestic affairs, although this was 'functional' in a society conjugated in the masculine form, and in which men dominated many important decision-making processes as well as all matters related to the administration of cash income.

### **TEK, Arbëresh Women and Plants: Re-establishing the Links**

Assuming that human nature is the result of history and society (Sahlins 1976) and that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please' (Marx 1986), it is vital to develop a vision of the future of triangular relationships among TEK, women and plants in the Vulture area.

It has to be admitted that the young women of Barile, Ginestra and Maschito will never have the same authority that their mothers and grandmothers had; at the same time, the new social contexts in which they are living will perhaps offer them new opportunities to express authority or autonomy in other ways. Regaining lost TEK will require time, and will be heavily dependent upon positive acceptance by the younger generation of the knowledge connected with the female cosmos of older women. Acculturation processes in schools and universities could generate insights and ideas for the formation of new activities that begin with the re-evaluation of the rapidly vanishing knowledge world of older relatives. Revalorization of women's domestic knowledge has to take into account the emancipatory challenges that young women have begun to pose, especially because of their roles in sustaining family incomes.

New visions of the relations between people and nature in the area studied will depend on whether nature will become a significant political and cultural force, as

has recently happened in other areas in central and northern Italy. Regional agricultural and rural development policies could support the creation of innovative income-generating activities such as the controlled gathering of weedy herbs, the re-introduction of old and archaic crops and handicrafts, the development of agro- and ecotourism, the management of natural and cultural pathways, and ethno-culinary events promoting regional and ethnic food niches.

Members of the young political class that has recently begun to administer the Lucania region, as well as many local institutions, have begun to adopt an eco-sustainable approach, especially in the valorization of typical local species and varieties ('folk varieties'), by providing financial help to new agro-tourist initiatives and to those who wish to convert traditional farms to organic agriculture. The goals of these policies include the production and marketing of biodiverse and 'speciality' food products and a kind of new 'responsible' tourism, whose circuits until recently remained far outside many inland areas of southern Italy. A few years are required to see the first concrete results.

Local women's cooperatives or enterprises, comprised of women belonging to different generations, could lead the way in taking forward the wild food plant heritage in eco-sustainable interdisciplinary projects. A few small female-run enterprises in the neighbouring region of Calabria have set an example (Alliance Project 2000). Such groups could develop strategies to enhance TEK transmission between elderly women and the younger generation in local schools, to sustain wild plant gathering and perhaps to close the gap between generations. Moreover, they could incorporate conservation of both natural and cultural/linguistic resources with economically profitable small-scale production of food plant derivatives and locally typical food products, managed by women.

## Notes

- 1 The term 'Traditional Knowledge' or 'TK' is used in this chapter to refer to every traditional practice as an (original) expression of a given human culture. The term 'Traditional Environmental Knowledge' or 'TEK' is used only in relation to traditional knowledge of the natural environment. TK and TEK are the result of historically determined dynamic processes, influenced by the constant interactions between the natural environment and many aspects of language and culture. TEK in particular consists of all practices carried out by people in traditional societies to classify, categorize and organize the natural environment. The analysis of its fluctuations, changes and evolution is one of the main objects of study of modern ethnobiology.
- 2 See, for example, Cappelletti *et al.* 1982; Novaretti and Lemordant 1990; Bonet *et al.* 1992, 1999; Gonz  les-Tejero *et al.* 1995; Raja *et al.* 1997; Bruni *et al.* 1997; Pieroni 2000; Agelet and Vall  s 2001; Corradi and Leporatti 2001.
- 3 Guarrera 1994; Giusti 1995; Br  schweiler 1999; Pieroni 1999b; Ertu   2000; and Pieroni and Giusti 2002.
- 4 In the perspective of ecological evolutionary biology, the plants considered are in fact 'weeds'. Weeds are plants that 'grow entirely or predominantly in situations markedly disturbed by man (without, of course, being a deliberately cultivated plant)' (Baker 1965). They represent a kind of intermediate between wild and cultivated species, and many are eco-sustainable nutritional sources (Bye 1981).

- 5 In other papers (Quave and Pieroni 2002; Pieroni *et al.* 2002b), women's TK related to healing practices (magic prayers and traditional phytotherapy in family primary health care) are discussed.
- 6 In folk classification systems, folk classifications of species don't necessarily correspond to scientific classifications (see the discussion of 'one-to-one correspondence' in Berlin *et al.* 1966; Berlin 1992): very often people name and classify a few scientific species with the same vernacular term in the same taxon ('under-differentiation'), while the contrary (diverse folk taxa corresponding to only one scientific taxon, or 'over-classification') seems to be very rare, at least in southern Europe (personal observation).
- 7 As in many other social and cultural contexts in southern Italy, the domestic world is dominated by women, who are exclusively involved in processing and preparing meals. That is true even among the youngest couples in the study area.
- 8 In ethnobiological studies of the kind attempted here, the correlation between capacity to recognize species and the age of the informants automatically contains an approximation for the youngest generation. It may be that children and teenagers do not recognize species, not because they have lost TEK, but because they have not yet learned to do so. In many studies this factor may affect assessments of the percentage of correct identifications (demonstrating 'ethnobotanical competence') among teenagers: in other words, their effective competence may sometimes be slightly underestimated. In this study, by choosing very commonly used plants, this source of possible 'misinterpretation' was minimized.

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# Women & Plants

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