

Thresholds of Healing: Good and Evil in the Moral Imaginary, Ritual Medicine, and Symbolic Practice in Arbëreshë Traditions

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Abstract

This narrative review investigates the symbolic, ritual, and moral dimensions of traditional medicine as practiced among the Arbëreshë, an Albanian diasporic community settled in Southern Italy since the 15th century. Through ethnographic, ethnopharmacological, and anthropological approaches, the paper explores how healing practices are embedded in a cosmology where illness is not merely physical, but a sign of spiritual or social imbalance. Healing becomes a transformative act that engages bodies, plants, prayers, and sacred gestures within a network of relations involving saints, ancestors, and the natural world. Special attention is given to the role of elder women as custodians of ritual knowledge, the use of symbolic objects and medicinal plants, and the intertwining of moral codes with ecological wisdom. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and comparative literature, the review highlights the fragility and resilience of these traditions, threatened by modernization, folklorization, and cultural forgetting, yet still alive in everyday acts of care and belief.

Keywords: Arbëreshë, traditional medicine, ritual healing, symbolic ecology, moral cosmology

Introduction

The Arbëreshë of Southern Italy are the descendants of Albanian refugees who fled the advance of the Ottoman Empire during the 15th and 16th centuries, seeking refuge across the Italian peninsula. This migration was not a single, discrete event but a prolonged historical process spanning generations, through which these communities gradually established themselves in the mountainous and rural regions of Basilicata, Molise, Calabria, and Sicily. These peripheral areas offered both seclusion and continuity, enabling the Arbëreshë to consolidate a cultural and linguistic identity that would prove remarkably resilient over the centuries (Mandalà & Knittlová, 2024).

For more than five hundred years, the Arbëreshë have actively cultivated a distinct cultural presence, resisting assimilation into mainstream Italian society. This resistance has been anchored in the preservation of their language – an archaic variant of Albanian – and religious practices rooted in the Byzantine rite. Among Albanian diasporic communities, the Arbëreshë are often regarded as the group that has most

successfully retained its linguistic heritage, traditional dress, and Eastern Christian liturgical customs. From early village settlements to later urban expansions, the Arbëreshë organized themselves into tightly knit communities that prioritized the maintenance of cultural transmission, particularly through oral language practices and communal rituals (Pollozhani, 2019).

Today, Arbëresh is recognized as an ethno-linguistic minority language in Italy. It features in university departments focused on linguistic minorities, is spoken in radio broadcasts, and is visible in local magazines, theatrical productions, musical performances, and even on public signage in areas of significant Arbëreshë presence. While the language has inevitably been shaped by centuries of contact with Italian and local dialects, it has nonetheless withstood considerable pressure and remains a vibrant component of Arbëreshë identity. This enduring heritage reflects a complex layering of Albanian, Italian, and Byzantine influences, shaping a unique diasporic identity in which language, faith, kinship, and tradition are intricately interwoven to sustain a sense of historical continuity and collective belonging (Mandalà & Knittlová, 2024; Pollozhani, 2019).

Within this framework of cultural persistence, the Arbëreshë have developed a symbolic universe that offers a distinctive interpretation of illness and healing. Health, in this context, is not merely defined by the absence of disease, but rather as a state of balance among the individual, the community, and the spiritual world. Illness is often perceived as a rupture in the moral and cosmological order – a signal that relationships with ancestors, saints, or the natural environment have been disrupted. Consequently, healing is conceived not only as a biological or clinical intervention but as a ritual and symbolic act of restoration, reconnecting material, social, and metaphysical realms (Quave & Pieroni, 2005).

This worldview distributes agency beyond the confines of the human body, attributing healing capacities to plants, sacred objects, words, and spiritual beings. Healing, in Arbëreshë communities, is a multisensory, performative practice embedded in collective life. It is largely the domain of elder women, who act as ritual specialists and custodians of ancestral knowledge. These women skillfully combine herbal remedies, prayers, incantations, and symbolic gestures to re-establish harmony and restore well-being. Their practices often correspond with agricultural cycles, liturgical calendars, and commemorations of the dead, thus situating individual health within broader temporal and cosmological rhythms (Pieroni & Quave, 2005).

As the Arbëreshë encounter the pressures of modernization, migration, and cultural commodification, their healing practices face new challenges – especially regarding authenticity, continuity, and linguistic transformation. One of the most notable shifts involves the ritual language itself: traditional formulas and incantations once spoken in archaic Albanian are increasingly being replaced by Italian or regional dialects. This linguistic shift reflects a broader dynamic of hybridization and adaptation, wherein traditional knowledge is simultaneously preserved and

transformed to remain meaningful in changing contexts (Quave & Pieroni, 2005; Pieroni & Quave, 2005).

This paper seeks to offer a comprehensive exploration of the symbolic, moral, and performative dimensions of Arbëreshë traditional medicine. It examines how healing is conceptualized as a moral and ontological process that transcends biomedical causality; how elder women serve as mediators of spiritual and social rebalancing through ritual expertise; how sacred objects, plants, and linguistic forms participate in an extended ecology of healing; and how these practices are embedded within temporal cycles that shape communal life. In addition, the paper addresses the contemporary tensions surrounding identity, heritage, and the politics of authenticity in a rapidly shifting world. Through this multifaceted lens, the study aims to illuminate the enduring vitality of Arbëreshë healing traditions as expressions of resilience, spiritual mediation, and cultural memory.

1. Cosmology and Moral Etiology

Among the Arbëreshë, illness is rarely perceived as a purely biological malfunction or the consequence of random physiological processes. Rather, it is understood as the outward symptom of a deeper rupture – one that originates in the moral, spiritual, or relational fabric of existence. This cosmological model draws on a worldview in which health is conceived as the outcome of balance and harmony between body, soul, kinship networks, ancestors, saints, and the natural environment. In this frame, well-being is not a neutral condition but a dynamic equilibrium that must be actively maintained. When this moral and spiritual balance is disturbed, its effects often surface as bodily or psychological distress (Mandalà & Knittlová, 2024; Pollozhani, 2019).

The etiologies of illness in Arbëreshë communities reflect this integrated cosmology. Common causes include supernatural intrusions such as the evil eye (malocchio in Italian, syri i keq in Albanian), believed to transmit harmful energy through envy, admiration, or excessive praise (Quave & Pieroni, 2005). Curses, ritual transgressions, or the neglect of obligations to saints and ancestral spirits are also seen as provocations of illness. Contact with liminal spaces – such as cemeteries, thresholds, or transitional times like dusk, seasonal changes, or feast days – may render individuals vulnerable to spiritual harm. Even natural phenomena such as storms or sudden winds may be interpreted as carriers of illness when experienced in contexts of moral or ritual imbalance (Pieroni & Quave, 2005).

At the heart of this system lies a binary moral logic – the cosmological interplay between good and evil. Illness is not merely accidental but morally intelligible; it often signals the intrusion of evil forces, the consequences of moral wrongdoing, or the withdrawal of protective spiritual energies. Conversely, healing is

associated with the restoration of goodness, order, and sacred alignment. In this symbolic universe, good and evil are not abstract principles but active, agentive forces that shape human experience, inhabit environments, and influence bodily states. This resonates with Mary Douglas's (1966) assertion that systems of purity and pollution reflect broader concerns about moral order and social boundaries. For Douglas, dirt is not "matter out of place," but a symbol of the disruption of cosmic and social structure – an idea closely mirrored in Arbëreshë perceptions of illness as a consequence of transgressing ritual or ethical norms.

This worldview also aligns with Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1963) notion of symbolic efficacy, which emphasizes the power of symbols and rituals to affect bodily states through their influence on the mind and social relations. Healing is not approached as a technical intervention but as a moral and cosmological rebalancing, enacted through carefully orchestrated ritual performances. These may involve prayers, invocations, the use of sacred water, herbs, protective amulets, or choreographed sequences of gestures and utterances designed to realign the afflicted individual with the forces of good and restore spiritual protection.

The healer – typically an elder woman renowned for her ritual competence – occupies a liminal role, mediating between the human and the spiritual worlds. She diagnoses illness not only through physical symptoms but through the patient's social history, emotional state, and ritual comportment. Drawing on Ernesto De Martino's (2012) concept of the "crisis of presence", these healing rituals respond to existential disintegration – moments when the afflicted person is no longer able to maintain their position in the world, socially or ontologically. The healing process becomes a means to reestablish presence: to restore the individual's capacity to speak, act, and be.

In this sense, illness is not simply something one suffers but a condition that threatens the very fabric of personhood. The therapeutic ritual becomes a site of ontological reconstruction. Victor Turner's (1967) theory of liminality is particularly useful here: illness is experienced as a threshold condition – a state of in-betweenness, where the individual is suspended between order and disorder, identity and disintegration. The healer's role is to guide the patient through this precarious zone, facilitating a symbolic passage from evil to good, from fragmentation to coherence, from chaos to cosmos.

Furthermore, this healing cosmology must be situated within broader political and historical forces. As David Graeber (2001) reminds us, systems of value – including moral judgments about good and evil – are not merely reflective but generative: they actively produce social worlds and hierarchies. In the case of the Arbëreshë, healing practices encode not just local understandings of illness, but also responses to broader anxieties about cultural survival, identity, and moral coherence in the face of external threats such as language loss, migration, and modernity.

Healing, then, is not reducible to symptom management; it is an act of moral realignment and symbolic reparation. The rituals carried out in Arbëreshë

communities aim to mend fractures in the cosmological and ethical order, reweaving connections between individuals, their communities, and the invisible forces that animate the world. Illness is treated as a message – a disruption that must be deciphered and addressed through ritual communication, moral reflection, and symbolic intervention. Ultimately, Arbëreshë healing is a moral performance, one in which good and evil are not merely explanatory categories but existential realities to be negotiated through ritual and relational repair.

2. The Gendered Role of Healers

Among the Arbëreshë, healing is primarily – and profoundly – a feminine domain, where the spiritual, moral, and corporeal converge through the embodied knowledge of women. The practice of traditional medicine is largely entrusted to elder women, locally referred to as quelli che aiutano (“those who help”), a phrase that captures not only their therapeutic function but also their moral vocation. These women are not mere herbalists or folk doctors; they are spiritual mediators, moral authorities, and cultural archivists whose labor sustains both individual well-being and collective identity. Their authority does not stem from formal institutions, but from genealogical transmission, lived experience, and relational trust cultivated over decades within their communities.

This form of expertise is matrilineally transmitted, often through apprenticeship, observation, and informal mentorship. Healing knowledge is embedded in acts of daily care, in prayers murmured at twilight, in the careful selection and preparation of herbs, and in the maintenance of ritual timing. Their role as healers draws legitimacy from a matrix of factors: spiritual charisma, social standing, moral discipline, and their perceived capacity to manage the invisible forces that cause illness or disorder (Quave & Pieroni, 2005). These women are known across villages, often remembered by name long after their passing, and sought after for their diagnostic acuity, ritual power, and moral discernment – especially in cases where illness is tied to envy, transgression, or spiritual imbalance. Their knowledge includes diagnostic categories such as malocchio (evil eye), fattura (curse), or ancestral unrest. Some women specialize in bone-setting, others in incantations and protective charms, while others focus on herbal preparations. Their healing repertoire often exists in tension with biomedicine, which may dismiss or marginalize their work. However, their domain is not only therapeutic but ontological – they heal not just bodies, but social relations and moral order. As Arthur Kleinman (1980) notes, illness is never just biological; it is embedded in systems of meaning, ethics, and power. Importantly, these healers rarely demand payment. Instead, symbolic offerings – bread, olive oil, wine, candles, or prayers – are accepted as expressions of gratitude. This refusal of commodification reveals a distinct moral economy, in which healing is

not a service exchanged for money, but a form of ethical labor embedded in communal reciprocity. As Marcel Mauss (2002) would argue, these exchanges are part of a gift economy, where reciprocity is moral rather than transactional. Healing, in this context, becomes a sacred duty, a response to divine calling rather than market demand. This labor is also gendered in deeply significant ways. It is performed in domestic spaces, near altars, kitchens, and gardens, where women exercise quiet yet profound authority. Feminist anthropologists, such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), have emphasized that care is not politically neutral – it is entangled in systems of gender, class, and moral power. Arbëreshë women healers challenge biomedical hegemony by asserting alternative epistemologies rooted in lived experience, intergenerational transmission, and spiritual intuition. Their labor is both resistance and reproduction: they reproduce a moral universe that places care, humility, and relationality at its center, while resisting the extractive logics of institutional medicine and modernity. Their healing practices also confront and mediate the forces of good and evil, not merely as symbolic binaries but as lived cosmological realities. Illness is often understood as the encroachment of evil – envy, sin, broken promises, curses – while healing reactivates forces of good through rituals of purification, prayer, and symbolic protection. This mirrors Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus, where embodied practices sustain social and moral worlds. In Arbëreshë cosmology, women are custodians of this moral order: through their rituals, they restore the balance between light and darkness, harmony and rupture.

As Seremetakis (1991) has shown in her study of mourning women in rural Greece, gendered ritual labor often encodes entire cosmologies of resistance, memory, and moral repair. Similarly, Arbëreshë healing is more than medicine – it is an act of cultural survival, a moral stance, and a metaphysical performance. These women, through their invisible labor, stabilize a symbolic universe that would otherwise risk dissolution in the face of modernization, linguistic loss, and cultural assimilation. Their work is not only a form of healing – it is a form of world-making.

3. Ritual Practice and Sacred Matter

Healing rituals among the Arbëreshë are deeply embodied, multisensory events that engage the physical, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions of human experience. Far from being passive or purely verbal acts, these rituals activate a rich choreography of gestures, materials, sounds, and scents. They are performative encounters with the sacred, carried out in domestic or liminal spaces, often mediated by an elder healer who combines inherited knowledge with intuitive skill. Central to these rituals is the integration of Catholic liturgical elements – such as the Sign of the Cross, typically repeated three times to invoke Trinitarian power, and prayers including the Ave Maria, Padre Nostro, and Gloria al Padre. These are not recited mechanically, but

rhythmically and with intent, reinforcing spiritual alignment and moral order. Spoken words serve both as invocation and protection, creating a sonic shield against harmful forces. Equally important are bodily gestures and the use of symbolic matter. Healers may trace signs over the afflicted area, breathe over herbs, or perform crossing gestures with iron keys or knives. Everyday items acquire sacred potency in this context. Among the most commonly used objects are red thread, often tied around the wrist to ward off the evil eye; iron keys and scissors, used in ritual cuts to sever invisible bonds; salt and vinegar, applied in protective or purifying rites; and holy water, typically drawn from a church and mixed with herbs. Rituals often occur in liminal spaces – thresholds, crossroads, fountains, and windows – where the boundary between human and spirit worlds is believed to be more permeable. These settings enhance the ritual's symbolic potency, facilitating contact with ancestral or divine forces. The use of plants and herbs further grounds the ritual in a symbolic ecology. Pieroni and Quave (2005) documented at least 54 botanical species used in Arbëreshë folk medicine, including *Marrubium vulgare* (horehound), *Salvia officinalis* (sage), and *Hypericum perforatum* (St. John's Wort). These plants are not selected solely for their pharmacological efficacy, but for their ritual and symbolic valence. For example, horehound is left under the moonlight before ingestion, connecting the plant's healing powers to lunar cycles and feminine energy. Sage is burned in domestic spaces to purify and protect against malevolent forces, its smoke seen as cleansing both spiritually and physically. St. John's Wort, traditionally harvested around the summer solstice, is hung above doors to shield the household from spirits or misfortune. Such practices resonate with Mary Douglas's (1966) theory of purity and danger, which posits that rituals function to maintain the boundaries between sacred and profane, order and disorder. Within this framework, Arbëreshë healing rituals serve as mechanisms of cultural hygiene, reaffirming social structure and cosmological coherence through symbolic action. Furthermore, the ritual objects themselves are not inert tools, but possess what Arjun Appadurai (1988) famously called social lives. As they move between households, altars, and ritual acts, they accumulate meanings, energies, and histories. A red thread used in one healing may later be buried, burned, or preserved, its role evolving with each ritual cycle. These objects thus become participants in the healing process—agents that mediate between visible and invisible realms. Arbëreshë healing rituals are sensory and symbolic systems through which illness is recontextualized and transformed. They are not merely therapeutic procedures, but acts of world-making, restoring balance within a cosmology where bodies, materials, and words are all infused with meaning and power. Curiously, all healing rituals among the Arbëresh are performed in the southern Italian dialect or standard Italian. In fact, in a cross-cultural comparison study of traditional household remedies in primary health care and ritual healing practices in two economically and socio-demographically similar communities in Lucania (inland southern Italy), *Ginestra/Zhure*, inhabited by ethnic

Albanians, who migrated to the area during the 15th century, and Castelmezzano, inhabited by autochthonous South-Italians, even healers who were fluent in the original Arbëresh language refrain from using it during these ceremonies. This may suggest that the Albanians initially adopted these healing practices from Italians, despite the fact that contemporary Italians, such as those in Castelmezzano, have largely forgotten them. The fact that such magical healing traditions have been preserved exclusively among the Albanians highlights, once again, the intricate and often challenging cultural transformations they have undergone, particularly in recent decades, as part of the acculturation process (Pieroni and Quave, 2005). For instance, “the evil eye” commonly known as malocchio in Italian and syri i keq in Albanian vis a condition shaped by psychological and social dynamics, lacking an identifiable natural or biomedical cause. As such, it cannot be treated through conventional medical approaches alone. If a younger relative, particularly one who does not believe in such practices, is thought to be afflicted, older family members may fear that recovery is unlikely (Quave and Pieroni, 2005). The evil eye is perhaps the most intricate affliction identified in this study area. The term denotes the supposed ability of certain individuals to cause harm – or at least transmit negative energy – through their gaze, often directed at people or their possessions (Migliore, 1997). A person who receives a compliment on a prized possession (like a house) or personal trait (such as beauty) without a follow-up blessing (abbenedica, or “God bless you”) is believed to risk being afflicted by malocchio. In arbëresh culture, the condition often manifests as a sharp, localized headache centered in the forehead and behind the eyes (Quave and Pieroni, 2005). One immediate way to prevent malocchio is to give the admired item directly to the person offering the compliment – if no blessing accompanies their words. However, this solution is unfeasible for highly valued items like a home, a child, or personal attributes such as physical beauty. In these cases, an alternative form of protection, frequently mentioned by women, is to carry a protective amulet in a brassiere or wallet (Massetti, 1993). Typically, the amulet consists of a small black cloth pouch filled with aromatic herbs – often including rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* L. [Lamiaceae]) – and religious items such as a small cross or an image of Padre Pio, the Apulian friar canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 2002. These amulets are usually prepared and blessed by a practitioner specialized in treating the evil eye. Another key method of both preventing and warding off evil eye involves the recitation of protective prayers, taught by local healers. These prayers – often identical to those used during healing rituals – vary among practitioners and are believed to safeguard the individual for an entire year. Traditionally, these readings must take place in church on Christmas Eve and are also a required part of the initiation process for aspiring evil eye healers (Quave and Pieroni, 2005).

4 Temporality, Rites of Passage, and Ritual Time

Among the Arbëreshë, healing is never an isolated or spontaneous event; it is deeply intertwined with temporal rhythms that govern both the individual life cycle and the agricultural year. Healing rituals are carefully synchronized with key transitional moments – birth, initiation, marriage, illness, and death – events that Arnold van Gennep (1909) famously theorized as rites of passage, characterized by the liminal experience of separation, transition, and reintegration. These liminal phases expose individuals to states of vulnerability where the usual order is suspended, making them susceptible to both malevolent forces (often conceived as manifestations of evil) and potential renewal through ritual action.

Van Gennep's tripartite model resonates strongly with Arbëreshë healing practices. For example, in the widely documented ritual against the malocchio (evil eye), the afflicted individual – often a child or vulnerable adult – is symbolically separated from ordinary life. This separation may involve confinement to a specific liminal space such as a secluded room, a kitchen corner, or a threshold, marking the rupture from everyday social relations and the entry into a sacred domain mediated by the healer. During the ensuing liminal phase, the healer conducts a sequence of prescribed gestures and utterances: whispered prayers, the burning of herbs, the symbolic dropping of olive oil into water (interpreted as a diagnostic act revealing spiritual contamination), and the passing of sacred objects over the body. These acts seek to neutralize or expel the malevolent energies believed to afflict the person. Finally, the reintegration phase is marked by gestures of social and moral restoration – offering food, performing the Sign of the Cross, or public declarations that the ritual is complete – thereby reinstating the individual's place within the community and moral cosmos.

These temporal sequences are more than abstract frameworks; they are embodied performances that restore moral and social order. As Victor Turner (1967) elaborated, the liminal phase is a time of ambiguity but also of potential transformation, where the subject is between identities and the community reaffirms its shared values through ritual. In this context, healing re-establishes harmony not only within the body but also within the moral universe where good and evil coexist in dynamic tension. The evocation and neutralization of evil – envy, curses, spiritual pollution – are central to the ritual, reinforcing the community's shared cosmology and ethical boundaries (Douglas, 1966).

Pastorelli's (2024) ethnographic research in Molise highlights the importance of ritual foodways as integral to this healing temporality. Special breads, sweets, and seasonal dishes prepared during healing ceremonies act as medicinal mnemonics, grounding the individual's recovery in collective memory and social continuity. Food serves as both medicine and metaphor, a material link between body, history, and place. This parallels Paul Connerton's (1989) argument that embodied practices such

as communal meals are crucial for the transmission of collective memory, anchoring identity in social and ritual time. In the Arbëreshë context, the act of eating after a healing ritual symbolizes reintegration and renewal, reweaving the individual into kinship networks, ancestral land, and sacred time.

Seasonal agricultural rituals further illustrate the cyclical dimension of healing and protection. The blessing of seeds in spring, the winter pig slaughter, and the autumnal harvest offerings are all moments charged with heightened spiritual significance. These agricultural thresholds are seen as vulnerable liminal zones where the boundaries between natural and supernatural blur, and where the forces of good and evil must be carefully negotiated through ritual to ensure community survival. Healing in these contexts is collective and anticipatory – an invocation of divine and ancestral powers to protect the community and its labor from misfortune and malevolence.

Thus, Arbëreshë healing rituals are embedded within a sacred temporality that is simultaneously cyclical and transformative. These rites mark transitions, restore balance, and maintain the moral ecology that sustains community life. Healing acts not only as a curative process but as a temporal re-siting of the self within broader patterns of change, memory, and belonging, affirming the ongoing dialectic between order and chaos, good and evil, continuity and renewal.

5 Heritage, Memory, and the Politics of Authenticity

In the contemporary landscape of Southern Italy, where forces such as modernization, tourism, and rural depopulation are rapidly reshaping social and cultural realities, Arbëreshë healing traditions confront a profound challenge: the process of heritagization. What were once deeply embodied, fluid, and living practices risk becoming staged performances – rituals and customs transformed into spectacle for external audiences rather than intimate communal acts. This transformation threatens to strip these practices of their original meanings, contexts, and moral weight.

Arbëreshë villages have increasingly evolved into public spectacles, designed as attractions for tourists. Healing rituals, which traditionally functioned within the private and sacred realms of family and community care, are now often reframed as “traditional customs” to be showcased and consumed. This phenomenon reflects a broader dynamic described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004), who argues that the designation of practices as “heritage” entails their transformation into metacultural products. In this process, living culture is extracted from its original context and recontextualized within institutions, museums, or media, often resulting in commodification and a loss of experiential depth.

However, this transformation is not unilaterally extractive or detrimental. Cristina Grasseni (2011) offers a more nuanced view, suggesting that heritage

communities can strategically engage with the language and frameworks of institutional heritage to protect, revitalize, and even empower their traditions. In several Arbëreshë villages, younger generations have begun reclaiming ritual healing and related customs not merely as nostalgic cultural markers, but as active tools for community healing and identity formation in the face of cultural erosion. Through initiatives that combine education, public ritual, and ethnobotanical research, these communities negotiate a space where tradition can coexist with contemporary realities.

Yet this engagement with heritage raises critical questions about the authenticity and vitality of ritual practices. As belief systems shift and communal bonds weaken under the pressures of globalization and secularization, one must ask: can ritual endure when its foundational belief and *communitas* – the shared emotional and spiritual solidarity described by Victor Turner (1998 – diminish or disappear? Turner warned that without *communitas*, ritual risks becoming an empty shell, a mere formality devoid of transformative power or social cohesion.

The Arbëreshë experience illustrates this delicate tension. Their healing traditions walk a fine line between preservation and performance, between lived spiritual practice and cultural exhibition. While institutional recognition and tourism can provide resources and visibility, they also pose the risk of fossilizing or trivializing practices that once thrived in intimate relational settings. The survival of Arbëreshë healing, therefore, depends not only on external validation but on the continuing emotional investment and belief of community members – an investment that sustains ritual as a living, meaningful engagement with health, morality, and identity.

In this context, heritage is not merely a passive inheritance but an active field of negotiation where past and present, tradition and modernity, insiders and outsiders continuously intersect. Understanding the politics of authenticity thus requires attending to these dynamic processes, recognizing the agency of heritage bearers, and acknowledging the fragility and resilience embedded within Arbëreshë ritual healing today.

6. Linguistic Hybridity and Ritual Healing: The Shift from Albanian to Italian in Arbëreshë Traditions

An important and often underexplored dimension of Arbëreshë healing traditions, thoroughly documented by Pieroni and Quave (2005), is the linguistic medium through which ritual magic, incantations, and healing prayers are performed. Despite the community's firm roots in Albanian linguistic heritage, the formulas and invocations used during healing ceremonies are now predominantly articulated in Italian or local Southern Italian dialects, rather than in Arbëreshë Albanian. This

phenomenon reflects a complex, centuries-long process of cultural adaptation and negotiation shaped by prolonged coexistence within a largely Italian-speaking environment (Pollozhani, 2019; Mandalà & Knittlová, 2024).

While the Arbëreshë language continues to function as a powerful marker of ethnic identity and cultural memory, its diminished role in ritual speech reveals significant shifts in how knowledge, especially spiritual and healing knowledge, is transmitted. This shift can be understood through the lens of language ideology and power dynamics (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), where Italian – being the dominant national language and also the language of formal liturgy within the Catholic tradition – gradually assumes prominence in spiritual contexts to ensure broader intelligibility and ritual efficacy among a multilingual population. The adoption of Italian and dialects may also respond to pragmatic concerns, such as the accessibility of ritual language to younger generations who may be more proficient in Italian than in Arbëreshë Albanian.

Nonetheless, this linguistic hybridity raises critical questions about the resilience and transformation of intangible cultural heritage. While the symbolic efficacy of healing rituals remains robust through the use of Italian and dialects, the gradual supplanting of ancestral language potentially affects the depth and authenticity of intergenerational transmission (Basso, 1996; Haviland, 2013). Language is not merely a vehicle for communication but a repository of cultural nuance, metaphor, and cosmological worldview; thus, its replacement risks a subtle erosion of the ritual's epistemological and moral dimensions. This concern resonates with scholarly debates on language shift and loss among minority communities worldwide, where heritage languages are often marginalized in ritual and symbolic domains (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

At the same time, the Arbëreshë community's embrace of linguistic hybridity in ritual contexts underscores the dynamic and negotiable nature of identity within diasporic groups (Clifford, 1994; Brubaker, 2005). Rather than a simple narrative of decline, this linguistic shift illustrates creative cultural continuity, where tradition is actively remade to respond to contemporary sociolinguistic realities. The coexistence and blending of Albanian, Italian, and dialect within healing practices represent a form of cultural resilience and adaptation, preserving core symbolic and ethical functions even as linguistic forms evolve (Pieroni & Quave, 2005).

In this light, the linguistic hybridity of Arbëreshë healing rituals embodies the community's persistent commitment to their ancestral heritage, while simultaneously engaging with the transformative pressures of integration and modernity. It illuminates how language, belief, and healing are deeply intertwined in the ongoing process of cultural negotiation, reminding us that healing traditions are not static relics but living, adaptive practices continuously shaped by historical, social, and linguistic forces.

Conclusion

Traditional healing among the Arbëreshë is far more than a historical artifact or folkloric curiosity; it constitutes a living ontology, a vibrant and dynamic moral universe wherein the body is inherently permeable, illness is understood as relational and symptomatic of disruptions in cosmic and social harmony, and healing is fundamentally an act of spiritual mediation and moral restoration. Within this worldview, dichotomies such as good and evil, health and sickness, nature and culture, are not fixed or binary categories but rather fluid and continuously negotiated through ritual performance, prayer, symbolic gestures, and collective care. This ontological framework challenges the reductionist biomedical model by emphasizing that the efficacy of healing is deeply embedded in the restoration of moral and spiritual order, rather than solely in physical intervention.

The linguistic hybridity characterizing Arbëreshë healing rituals – where magic formulas and incantations have increasingly shifted from the ancestral Albanian to Italian and local dialects – reflects the community's ongoing negotiation between the preservation of tradition and the practicalities of adaptation within a plural linguistic environment (Quave & Pieroni, 2005; Pieroni & Quave, 2005). This linguistic evolution illustrates broader cultural processes of integration, resilience, and transformation. Far from indicating cultural loss, this shift underscores the dynamic nature of heritage, where symbolic and ethical functions are maintained even as forms and languages adapt. The hybrid linguistic landscape thus becomes a site of cultural memory and innovation, where traditional healing remains relevant and effective within contemporary socio-cultural contexts.

From an anthropological perspective, the Arbëreshë healing tradition invites a rethinking of epistemologies and efficacy in medicine. Healing is not simply a technical or biomedical act; it is a deeply relational, embodied practice, where belief, care, and moral accountability are intricately intertwined (Schepers-Hughes, 1992). In this framework, symbols and rituals do not merely signify spiritual realities; they enact them, actively shaping lived experiences of health, identity, and communal cohesion (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Turner, 1967). Healing becomes a performative process, a dialogue between human and non-human agents – plants, spirits, ancestors – whose cooperation is essential to restoring balance. This challenges dominant narratives that marginalize spiritual and symbolic dimensions in favor of biomedical objectivity, calling for an ethical witnessing that listens attentively to the epistemologies embedded in these practices.

In an era marked by globalization and cultural homogenization, localized healing epistemologies like those of the Arbëreshë face risks of commodification, dilution, or erasure. Safeguarding these traditions requires more than static preservation; it demands recognizing their adaptive vitality and supporting the

community's agency in defining, performing, and transmitting their heritage. This approach aligns with contemporary calls in medical anthropology and indigenous studies to valorize pluralistic understandings of health and healing as culturally situated and historically grounded (Kleinman, 1988; Lock & Nguyen, 2018).

Ultimately, the study of Arbëreshë traditional medicine provides profound insights into the human condition – our inherent vulnerability, our creative responses to suffering, and our enduring need for ritual meaning as a pathway to wholeness and social belonging. By illuminating how healing is woven into complex moral, cosmological, and linguistic tapestries, this tradition enriches our understanding of health as a holistic and deeply cultural process. It also reaffirms that healing, at its core, is an ethical and ontological engagement with the forces of good and evil, order and disorder, life and death – a continuous negotiation that sustains not only individual bodies but entire communities and their histories.

Author contributions

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