



Cultural Trek in the Greek-speaking Villages of Lower Italy

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Received: 2 June 2023 ▪ Revised: 4 October 2023 ▪ Accepted: 1 November 2023

Abstract

In this article, the region of the Greek-speaking villages of Puglia, the region known as Lower Italy, will be presented and, through research, a route will be proposed, as a means of preserving Hellenism and the unique cultural heritage of the place. The trek will present the nine villages with their archaeological and historical monuments, as well as intangible heritage elements, such as the Griko language, dances, traditional music, and religious festivals.

Keywords: Lower Italy, Greek-speaking, tarantella, Greek, cultural trek, cultural tourism.

1.1 Cultural tourism

The development of cultural tourism as a product of a strategic policy to promote a region in a competitive market, according to Manola and Tsatalbassoglou (2020) is, nowadays, gaining more and more acceptance, as new alternative plans are developed through different from the classic sectors in the tourism industry, for holidays that look out for the sustainability of a place.

According to McKercher and Ho (2011), cultural tourism, although it initially promotes the interests of the tourism industry and has some negative points, basically improves the quality of life of residents, through sustainable economic development, as it is based on the preservation of material and intangible advantages of the region, through precisely this maintenance of them.

The issues related to cultural tourism according to e-Culture (2009: 360) are distinguished for their variety and include, not only objects and intangible elements and events such as local history with tangible monuments, such as distinct architecture, local technology, clothing, items handicrafts, but also intangibles such as gastronomy, art and religious, musical and oral traditions and dialects spoken by the inhabitants of a region. Griko is spoken in this area, and these will form the axis, which the presentation of the trip will be organized around, as the Greek language is a trademark of the area.

1.2 *Grecia Salentina*

Apulia (Puglia) includes the region of Salento, which is the easternmost point of the Italian peninsula. It is a flat area with smooth hills. South of the city of Lecce in the place called Greece of Salento (*Grecia Salentina*) is the Greek-speaking villages centered on Kalimera where the population speaks the dialect and the residents welcome visitors with a sign at the entrance of the settlement that reads “*Kalos Irtate*”.

In Lower Italy, the villages are full of customs and traditions reminiscent of Greece, which makes sense if one considers the geographical proximity and the historical elements that connect the regions. The Italian parliament recognized the region of Salento as an ethnic and linguistic minority and freed the inhabitants to fight for the preservation of their identity without having, according to Profili (1999), separatist tendencies, as Italian nationals, bearers of a separate tradition, declare.

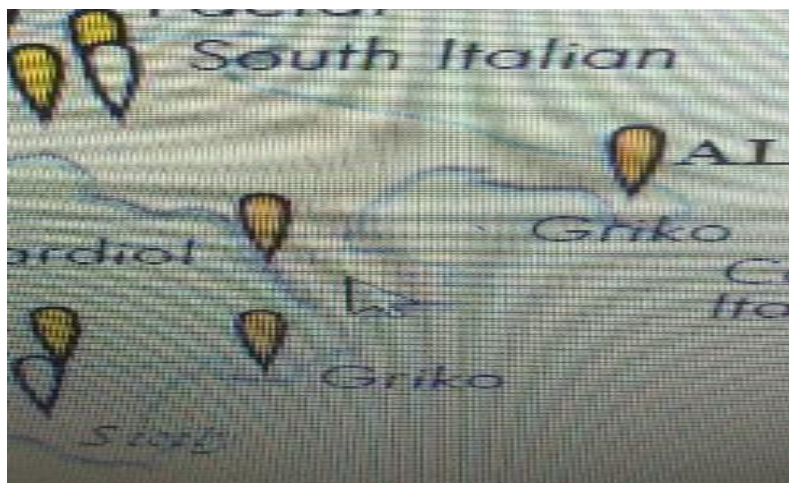
Many and impressive are the points that reveal a common culture such as the buildings, the traditions, and, to a certain extent, the language.

1.3 *Cultural elements*

The dialect of Salento

According to Kamaroudis (2015: 21), a dialect is a form of language that keeps a distance from the common language type and is spoken by several speakers in a wide geographical area.

The Catoitalian dialect is spoken with two varieties [1] in southern Italy in two regions, in Calabria [2] and the region of Salento in Apulia (*Grecia Salentina*). According to the UNESCO Red Book of Threatened Languages [3], Griko today has about twenty thousand (20,000) native speakers.



Source: unesco.org

Photo 1. South Italy on the UNESCO map

The relationship between Greek and Catoitalian is interactive and dates back to ancient times as, as Greco (2001) states, the Greeks created a peculiar culture that developed complex societies long before the arrival of the Romans.

Systematic theories related to the subject have been developed from time to time. Rohlfs (1997) argued that this dialect comes directly from the inhabitants of the ancient colonies

of Greater Greece. Aprile et al. (2002) summarizing the theories other than Rohlf's also present as the main ones those, who want the Greek of the region to be an outgrowth of Byzantine rule in Southern Italy during the 9th and 12th centuries AD, or finally Byzantine Greek has mixed with the ancient ones to give the current form of the dialect.

The specific dialect, in fact, can be considered an evolution of the ancient language that was enriched and renewed during the Middle Ages, but also from the frequent contact of the two cultures and a proof of this close bond, as Macri (2016) mentions, it can be considered beyond the existence of common words, the oral tradition of a series of stories, even fairy tales, few, but existing, with a common theme.

Devoto (1962) does not think that this dialect was preserved precisely, due to the intangible cultural heritage of the Greek-speaking inhabitants.

According to Kondo (2017), the present-day Greek speakers of Lower Italy have recognized the importance of preserving the dialect and the identity of the region and are turning, as Tomassi (2015) states, to its written record, as well as through its codification and organization with morphological and syntactic rules could be made available for teaching and learning, and becoming, from a language of simple communication, to a language of study of a culture about to disappear, which, in this way, will be saved at the last moment.

The action "Pos matome Griko" is also moving in this direction, which, as a free multimedia website since 2013, is a completely free source of knowledge. Funded by the European Union, it is an effort to preserve and bequeath the language, addressed not only to students, teachers, and adults, in Italian university departments, where Modern Greek is taught, but also in general to anyone interested in deepening their knowledge regarding Griko, as well as other cultural elements that shape the character of the area.

- **Gastronomy-Music-Dance**

In the preservation of the cultural identity of the Greek-speaking inhabitants, in addition to the language, gastronomy, music, and dance played an important role, often gathered in festivals such as the most famous one also known as "La notte della Taranta" [4] which is a trademark for the preservation of delivery. As stated on the official website of the festival [5], the first event took place timidly on a small stage in Melpignano in 1998 and today it is an event of global scope that included foreign elite guests who were invited to re-interpret Salento folk songs and entertain with dances with tarantella [6] and pizzico [7] to lead the way. Today the festival includes not only Griko, but also folk traditional music from all over the peninsula, and it continues to be the most important festival for the dissemination of local culture.

In addition to the official authorities, the private initiative also plays an important role as there are nurseries [8] interested in preserving the unique local tradition. In them, a serious attempt is made to combine the past with the future by promoting new musical groups to discover the roots of Griko through songs and dance. Thus, interesting adaptations are proposed, the rural life of Grecia Salentina is presented through photo exhibitions, as well as product tasting, which is an important point of reference since, as argued by Deliyiannis et al. (2022), food is a key ingredient that makes a place attractive, as it invites tourists to get to know the culinary traditions and get an authentic sense of the culture of a region.

From the Greek side, there seems to be an increased interest, especially in recent years, for Greeks to get to know the customs and traditions of the region, as the emotion for the preservation of Greek traditions in Italy is evident.

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize the warm climate which the residents welcomed the President of the Republic Mrs. Katerina Sakellaropoulou, during her visit last April [9].

2. Cultural trip to Grecia Salentina

There are nine villages where Griko is spoken today, Calimera, Castrignano dei Greci, Corigliano, d'Otranto, Zollino, Sternatia, Martano, Martignano, Melpignano, and Soleto. Tomassi, in an interview he gave with Marchiscella (2017), considers two to be the most important, Sternatia, due to the population predominance of Griko use, and Calimera, due to the general cultural concept.

- **Calimera**

The city's tourist website mentions Piazza del Sole, with the Basilica of S. Brizio as a focal point for hiking in the area.

In Via Costantini one can admire interesting buildings of the seventeenth century and a little further down, in San Vito, those, which are characteristic of the social stratification, as the houses of the nobles are at a short distance from those of the lower classes. Via Montinari is the most important road with the homonymous Palazzo, the seat of the last Orthodox Metropolitan of the area, Sgismondo de Matteis, who died in 1621.

Then, in the park, the visitor can “read” through the sculptures, the identity of the area, which is characterized by the existence of two languages, Italian and Greek that was in danger of being lost with modernization; the pioneer for its preservation was Palumbo, whose bust can be found here, as well as the marble column, from the 4th century BC, a gift of the city of Athens to Calimera in the 1960s where it is written, “Zeni esù en ise ettu’ ‘sti Kalimera” [10]. On the 28th and 29th of July, the great feast in honor of San Brizio takes place every year and crowds of people flock to worship and feel the intense religiosity. Ftikos (2019) suggests Easter as a visiting period, when the tourist can experience the representation of the Passion of Christ based on the Byzantine ritual. An important point is the Natural History Museum, where, in recent years, there has been an intense effort to preserve the turtles of the area. The route continues outside the city: we take the provincial road Calimera – Martignano. The Madonna delle Grazie Chapel, known as the Mantovano Chapel, dates from 1696. To the left of the road, is the pangiarà, that is, a large drystone, a square structure with an external staircase.

- **Martignano**

Located about two kilometres from Calimera, it has about 1800 inhabitants and with special buildings that are often visited by many architects, due to their Byzantine influence, such as the church of San Pantaleone and the “pozzelle”, the ancient rainwater collection systems. In the chapel of S. Giovanni Battista there are wonderful frescoes dedicated to both Saint John and the Apostles. Nearby, one can visit the Institute of Mediterranean Studies of Lecce.

- **Corigliano d' Otranto**

Corigliano, which has been twinned with Ilión, with about 6,000 inhabitants, is one of the most visited villages in the area because of the Castello dei Monti, which is the most complete monument of military architecture in Puglia. Of medieval construction, it was adapted by Giovan Battista de' Monti, to the needs of the military art of the 16th century, is surrounded by a moat and has a square plan with four circular towers.

Beyond the castle, the traveler can admire impressive buildings and mansions of the 18th century. The best time to visit is the feast of the patron saint Agios Nikolaos. In the village there is also the local cultural association Argalio, that is, “loom” which, as the relevant website [11] mentions, devotes itself to preserving the rich culinary and musical heritage of the place, by rescuing testimonies and transferring them as sources to be recorded by scholars in Italy and Greece.

- **Castrignano dei Greci**

The Greeks, who were in the area during the sixth century AD, used the existing fortresses to repel the attacks of the German tribes. Around the year 1000 AD, the fortress was transformed into a castle with three towers, which the village was built around, a village, which the Greeks, according to the official website [12] of the municipality, gave language, manners, and customs to. Its current architecture is special as it resembles a castle. An important point of the visit from the first era of the settlement is the crypt of Agios Onofrios, which dates back to the 6th century and came back to light in 1965, after earthworks. It is a natural cave designed to meet the religious needs of the inhabitants and consists of two areas, the first larger dedicated to Sant' Onofrio and with an altar carved into the stone. In the church of Madonna Annunziata, there are rare frescoes from the nineteenth century. Another important point of reference is the Clock Tower and the Pozzelle Park, which consists of dozens of deep wells in excellent condition.

- **Martano**

Further south of the route is Martano, the largest of the Greek-speaking villages in the surrounding area, with approximately 10,000 inhabitants. The most important monument [13] of the area is the medieval castle, but also worth a visit are splendid churches, such as L' Assunzione and Maadonna del Rosario. In Martano there is also the menhir Santu Totaru with a height that reaches 4 meters and 80 centimeters, it is also called Mehnir di Teofilo, because it is located on the homonymous street or Santa Lucia. The monolith is located in a place surrounded by houses, has a square shape and an engraved cross.

- **Zollino**

Full of menhirs and dolmens [14], it is the oldest settlement in the area and has about 2,000 inhabitants. Its churches of Pietro e Paolo and Sant'Anna stand out for a winter event, the Festa de lu Focu, a festival that takes place every year on December 28 since 1978. Traditional dances with Greek music with culinary creations based on recipes of the Salento peninsula are a hallmark record of the celebration.

- **Melpignano**

The Roman centurion Melpinio gave his name to the village, but it is probably of Byzantine origin [15]; perhaps this is the reason why even today it maintains the Byzantine standard during the religious service in the famous church of S. Giorgio. At the height of the tourist season every August the aforementioned Notte della Tantara festival takes place, with over 100,000 spectators.

- **Sternatia**

Rohlf's argued that the name comes from the Greek word "cistern" and is justified by the fact that the village has four large tanks for collecting rainwater. The second and more beloved version by the residents wants to be an alteration of the word "embrace", as the village is a union of seven smaller settlements, formed to avoid the predatory raids of the barbarians and the fortress mentions on its outer wall the word *Fillia* "Friendship" (*Porta Filia*). An important day in the village is August 22nd, when the patron saint San Giorgio is celebrated. Other points of tourist interest are the Chiesa Matrice, and the crypt of San Sebastiano. It is worth a visit to the Chora group, which maintains an unquenchable interest in the Griko-Salentina culture.

- **Soletto**

The village has about 5,500 inhabitants and, as Greco (2001) states, it was a pivotal point for the historical development of Byzantine Lower Italy.

Famous according to Lombardo (2011) since its discovery by the Belgian archaeologist Thierry van Compernelle is the map of Soletto, the oldest known map on a shell [16] that is undoubtedly ancient. Although doubts have been raised about the age of the map, tourists from all over the world flock to Taranto to admire it, participating in the regional development of the peninsula. In the city, one should not neglect to visit the churches, Santo Stefano, Anime Sante del Purgatorio, and San Nicola, each of which has to offer images of another era, as they belong to different historical periods.

However, in the wider area of Soletto there are important monuments such as Palazzo Baronale, a castle built in the 11th century by the Normans.

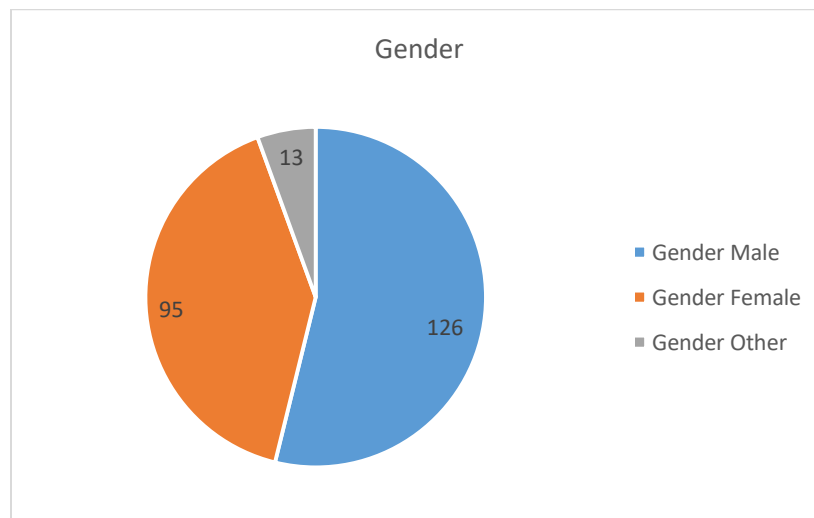
3. Research

In order to investigate the knowledge of the Greeks regarding Grecia Salentina and the disposition of a tourist visit to the region, an attempt was made to cross-reference the aforementioned with a survey that included a questionnaire and an interview, ways of gathering information, which according to Tsopanoglou (2000: 84-86) constitute a process survey data recording. When the survey questionnaire and interview process was completed, it was given to people, other than the participants in order to see if there were any misinterpretations.

The questionnaire was given, by the three researchers, to Greeks, from 1 to 26 September 2022, at Syntagma Square, at Davaki Square in Kallithea, at the Metro Station in Ilioupoli and at the Metro Station in Egaleo. A total of 234 people accepted to answer. The results of the questionnaire and the interviews are then presented.

- **Questionnaire**

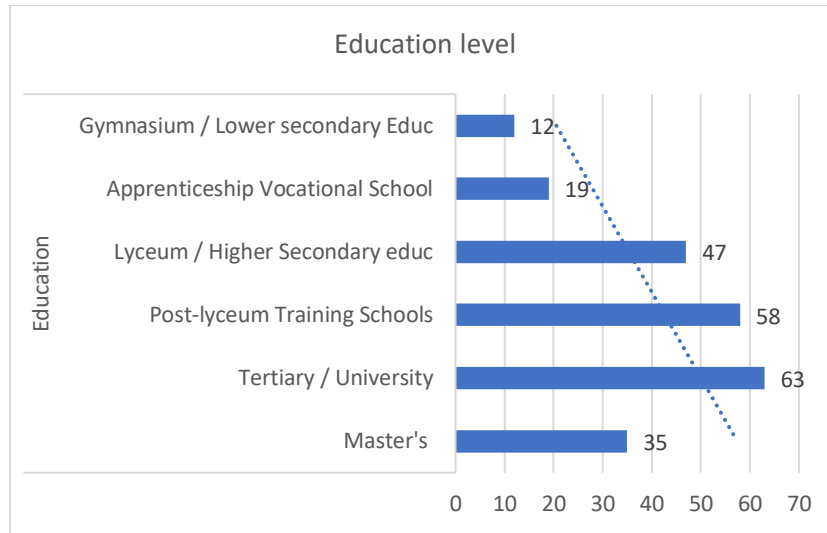
Question 1: “Gender”



Graphic 1. Gender

From the answers we see that 53.8% of the respondents are men and 40.9% are women, while there is also a percentage of 5.3% that answers the specific question “other”

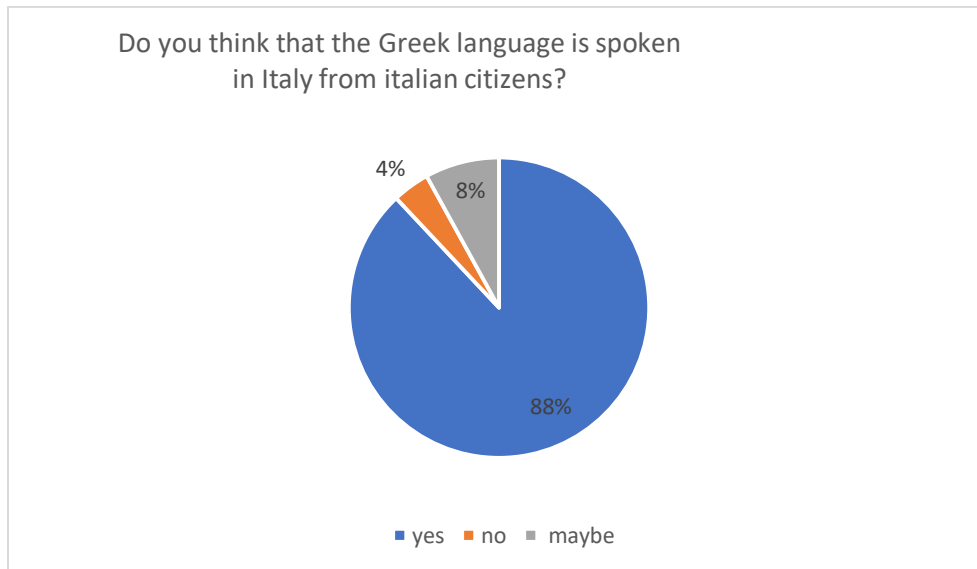
• **Question 2: “Education”**



Graphic 2. Educational level

It should be noted that the choices concern the Greek level of education, therefore as can be seen in the diagram, 31 people in total have completed compulsory education and apprenticeship, 105 people have finished secondary education and, of these, 58 have some kind of specialization, while 98 have a university degree

• **Question 3: “Do you think that the Greek language is also spoken in Italy by Italian citizens?”**



Graphic 3. Greek language spoken besides Greece

The overwhelming majority of those questioned, 206 people, believe that the Greek language is also spoken in the neighboring country, while only 7 give a negative answer and 21 hesitate to answer.

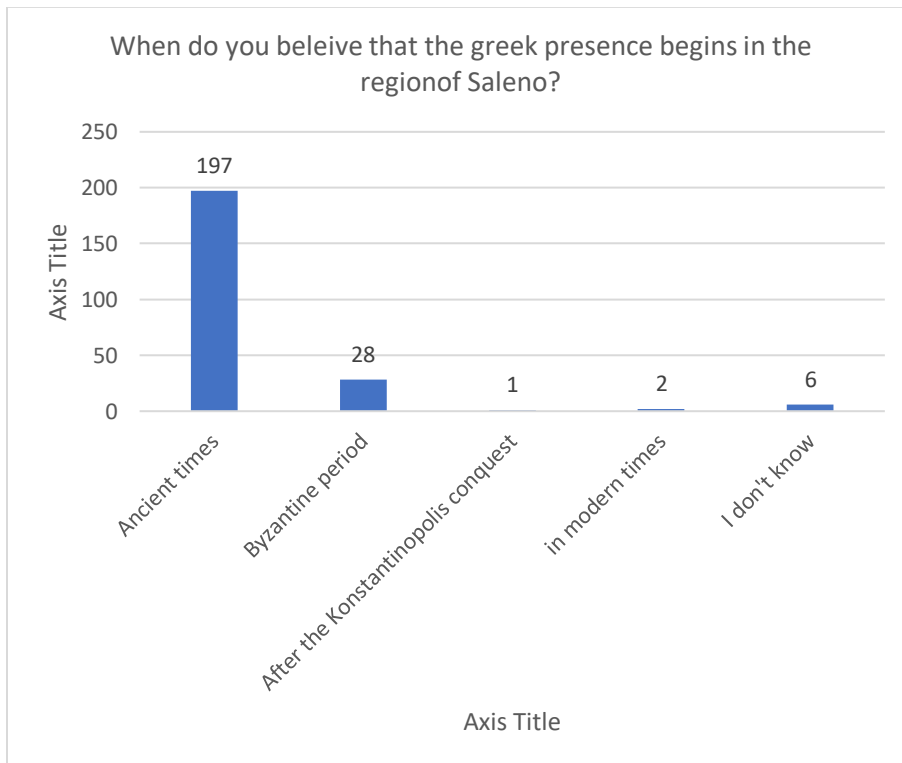
• **Question 4: “Do you know any villages in Apulia where the Greek language is spoken?”**



Graphic 4. Greek-speaking villages of Puglia

In this particular question, there is a decrease in positive answers compared to the previous one, most likely due to the geographical terms or the non-existence of the names of the villages, as it then appears that the relationship is reversed.

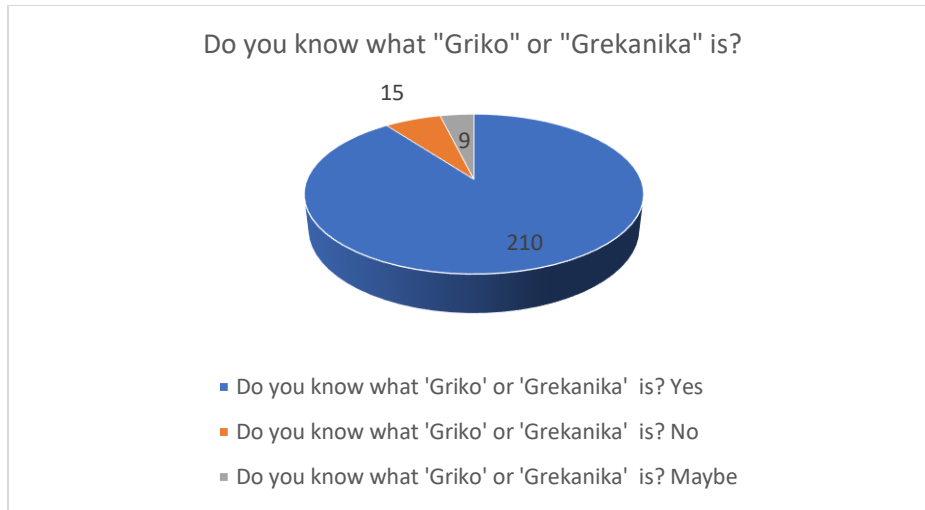
• **Question 5: “When do you think the Greek presence in the area of Salento began?”**



Graphic 5. Greek presence in peninsula

The dominant value (mode), i.e., the rank that collected the highest frequency (Tsopanoglou, 2000: 127) clearly shows us that the respondents are well aware that the presence of Greeks in South Italy starts from the era of colonization in ancient times.

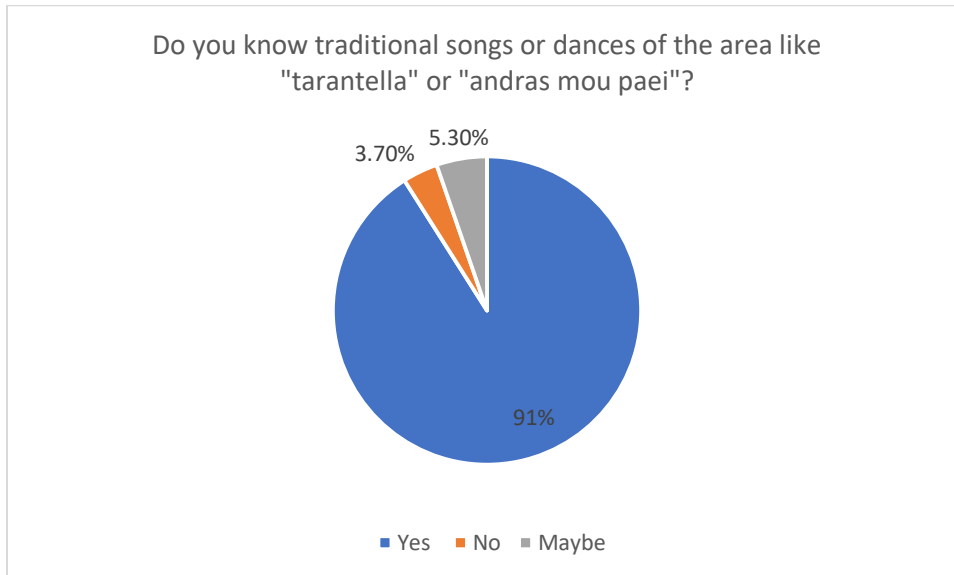
• **Question 6: “Do you know what Griko or Grekanika are?”**



Graphic 6. “Griko – Grekanika”

As can be seen from the graph, the respondents know the terms “Griko” and “grekanika”

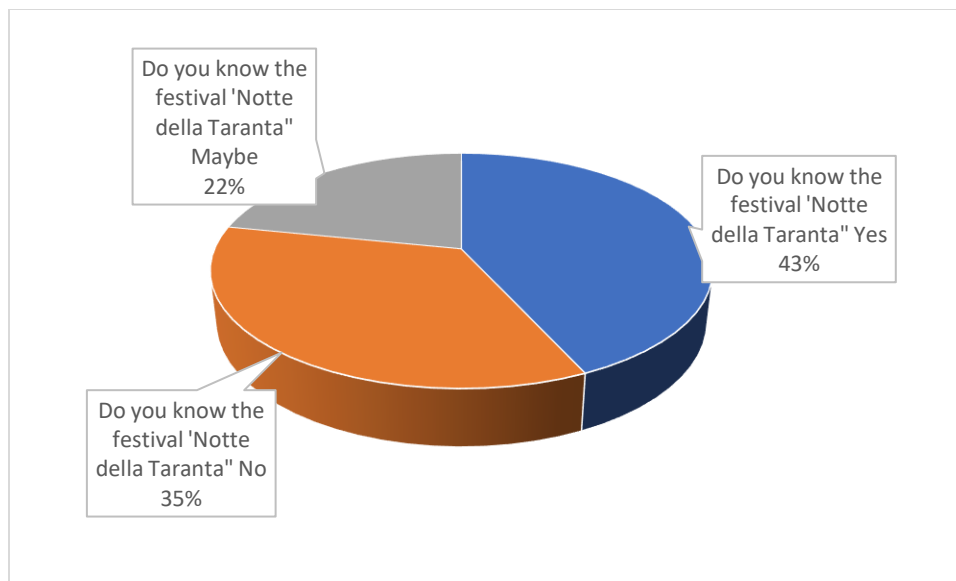
• **Question 7: “Do you know traditional songs and dances of the region such as the tarantella or ‘my man is going’?”**



Graphic 7. Traditional songs or dances

From the graph it can be seen that traditional songs like “My man goes” or dances like “tarantella” are familiar to the vast majority of respondents, as 213 out of 234 answered positively to this question and only 9 negatively, while 12 were not sure.

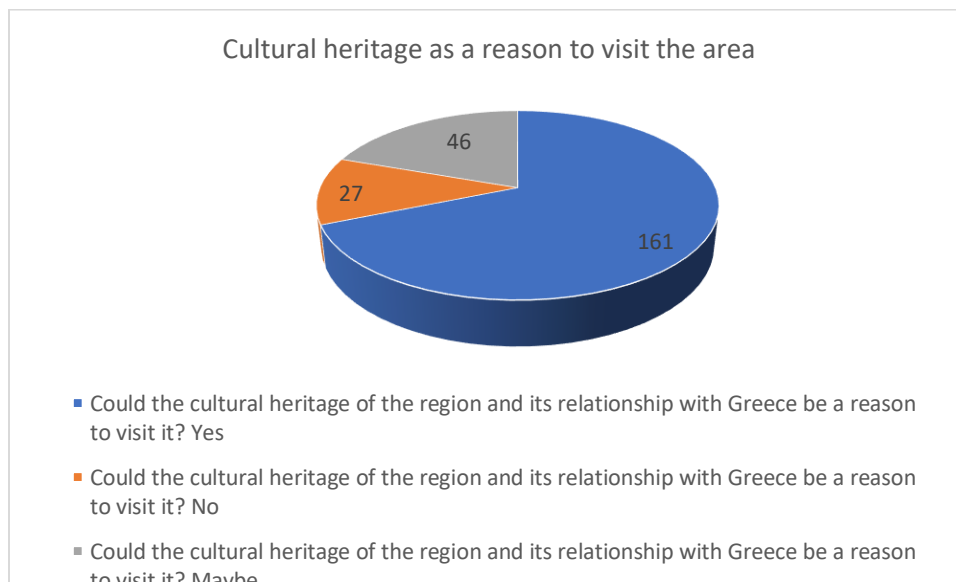
• **Question 8: “Do you know the festival ‘La notte della Taranta’?”**



Graphic 8. The festival ‘Notte della Taranta’

As the graph shows us, the festival is not particularly well known to the Greek public, as, out of the 234 people, 101 answered positively, 82 negatively and the answer “maybe” was given by 51 respondents

• **Question 9: “Could the cultural heritage of the area and its relationship with Greece be a reason for your visit?”**



• **Interview**

As stated by Bird et al. (1999: 320-21), the interview seeks to show the views of the population being interviewed by focusing on the perspectives from which individuals experience the events

The interview questions captured the views of more than 24 participants. The six questions were open-ended and were made with the aim of clarifying the thoughts and attitudes

of the participants towards the Grecia Salentina region and especially if cultural tourism could act as a motivation to visit the region of Lower Italy Greeks. The participants were randomly selected based on their educational level, six people from compulsory education, six from secondary, and six from higher education among those, who were easy to contact for the interview.

• **Question 1: “From what source do you know the Greek villages of Lower Italy?”**

The question had multiple responses, with school being the answer that automatically garnered the most positive responses, as well as Mass Media, and the Internet.

• **Question 2: “Do you think the local people keep the traditions?”**

The answers were positive and the main reason is the use of language.

• **Question 3: “Would you be interested in getting to know the area up close, and for what reasons?”**

The responses were on the whole positive and the main reasons suggested were:

- “to find out how compatible the cultures of the two countries are”
- “to see if they keep (using/speaking) Greek in their daily life”
- “Out of curiosity”
- “to find out how strong Greek culture is in Lower Italy”
- “To learn more about the history of the area and to get to know the customs and traditions”

• **Question 4: “Would you visit the region to get to know the culture of the region and particular elements that unite Greece with Italy such as language-music-dance-gastronomy?”**

21 out of 24 responses were positive. Most people talked about Maria Farandouri, who made the song “Andras mou paei” and the band Encardia widely known. While there were no reports on the dance and gastronomy of the region, the respondents were willing to get to know the special character of the Greek-speaking villages.

• **Question 5: “Would you combine a possible trip with the “La note della Taranta” festival?”**

Certainly, after joy.

• **Question 6: “Is there any reason that would prevent you, from making a trip to the area?”**

The main reason stated for preventing such a trip is financial.

4. Conclusions – Suggestions

As can be seen from the above, the residents are active in the area to preserve their character, with the help of local associations that support cultural events and highlight Grecia Salentina worldwide as a tourist destination of cultural and Greek interest. Although the Greeks know about the existence of Greek-speaking villages in the area, they do not know the names or have no special knowledge of the traditions in the area. In recent years, there has been a systematic effort to collect material and promote the region as a tourist destination, as the Greek-speaking villages of Lower Italy are a source of history, beauty, tradition and cultural heritage. The existence of Hellenism, in the Italian peninsula from ancient times until today, is an admirable fact, which

can very easily develop into an opportunity for one to delve deeper into the tradition, culture and history of Hellenism. Thus, the obligation of Greece to support actions in this direction becomes necessary, even with simple actions such as:

- Erasmus programs and scholarships to and from Grecia Salentina for students;
- Sending teachers to teach the language in the schools of the region, since learning the language and history of each place promotes the creation of friendship and mutual respect;
- At the academic level, the exchange of experiences and opinions at meetings and conferences;
- Development of bilateral programs for learning Greek and Italian;
- Development of technological actions (e.g., Application – gamification etc.) as the times require adaptation to the changing conditions, in order to preserve the cultural wealth and deliver it unharmed to the new generations, while being renewed through it;
- A subsidized exchange network of cultural activities;
- Promotion of local products, handicrafts, and gastronomy through seminars.

Creation of a tourist network, to strengthen the authenticity of the area through the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism that will integrate characteristics of the place and will promote activities of the members with other counterparts in Greece, for the exchange of opinions and experiences

4.1 Conclusions

As can be seen from the research, the Greeks know the region from their textbooks of ancient history, even elementary school, and are strongly fascinated by the fact of the continuous existence of this culture, but they are now discovering the region through tourism. The state should move in this direction. The strengthening of tourist traffic through the subsidization of tourist packages would be a strong incentive to include the region in future trips of Greek citizens. The need to preserve tradition through the effective development brought about by a deep understanding of the cultural background of a region is proving more and more imperative.

As a tour represents moments of encounter and exchange between two parties that benefit and are enriched by mutual cultural knowledge, tourism in this particular case goes beyond the narrow limits of an economic activity and evolves into a driving force to save an arc of culture.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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- <https://www.pugliaautentica.it/i-comuni/unione-comuni-grecia-salentina.html>
- <https://www.comune.martignano.le.it/vivere-il-comune/territorio/da-visitare/item/cappella-di-s-giovanni-battista.html>
- <http://www.argalio.it/>
- <https://www.castrignanodeigreci.it/>
- <https://www.comune.martano.le.it/>
- http://www.greciasalentina.info/Martano_mon.htm
- https://www.academia.edu/62340590/La_mappa_di_Soleto_nel_contesto_geografico_delineat_o_dalle_fonti_narrative_antiche

[1] Historical and geographical factors caused the differentiation, but the Greek of Calabria and the Griko of Salento are so similar that on the Unesco map they appear as Griko I and Griko II.

[2] The Grecanika of Calabria as an idiom is spoken by fewer and fewer native speakers as social reasons such for example obsolescence and immigration, have limited it mainly to the region of Galliciano (GreciaCalabra.net). Organizations such as the “Università per la Terza Età e per il Tempo Libero della Bovesia – Area Ellenofona” (University of the Third Age – where a certificate of attendance is given at the end of free courses) organize conferences and various events to preserve the character of the area.

[3] This is the new edition of Unesco that concerns endangered languages and replaced the World Atlas of Threatened Languages. From 2009, an online edition was also launched.

[4] “The Night of Taranto.”

[5] <https://www.lanottedellataranta.it/it/la-notte-della-taranta/la-storia-del-festival>.

[6] The tarantella is a 6/8 dance that originated as an antidote to the panic caused by spider bites (tarantella).

[7] Type of tarantella dance.

[8] Such is the action “Gricanti festival” organized by Masseria Sant' Angelo in Corigliano d'Otranto (“Tutto pronto per il Grikanti festival”, lecceprima.it).

[9] April 2022.

[10] “You are no stranger here in Calimera.”

[11] Argalio.it

[12] <https://www.castrignanodeigreci.it/>.

[13] According to the website of the municipality www.comune.martano.le.it.

[14] Menirs are monoliths placed vertically on the ground, while dolmens are constructions of at least two menirs supporting a horizontal boulder. Their construction dates back to the Neolithic period.

[15] <http://www.greciasalentina.info/Melpignano.html>.

[16] Fragment of a vase.

