

Lost Dialects: Arvanitika Through the Eyes of Lambrini

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A while ago, a post on social media caught my attention. It referred to a [documentary made by a young student](#), Lambrini Papachristodoulou, about a disappearing language, Arvanitika. Initially, I was intrigued by the fact that a high school student had made a documentary, so I researched it a bit more, watched the [documentary](#), and read [the website Lambrini had created](#). I wanted to learn more about how she became interested in such a topic. So, while searching, I read her words:

"Language is the core of culture. When we lose our language, we lose a part of our cultural wealth. Songs, fairy tales, poems and customs are inextricably linked to language, and when it disappears, they fade away. It is like erasing a chapter from a book that will never be written again."

With these words of Lambrini echoing in my mind, I decided to contact her and ask her to share her story with us.

Lambrini and her documentary



—Can you tell us a little about yourself?

I am a 3rd grade high school student living in Athens. My dad is Greek-American and my mom is from Limnes Argolida, a village where Arvanitika is spoken. I am majoring in humanities and have been involved in theater and literature for several years.



—How did your interest in Arvanitika begin and what inspired you to create the documentary?

My interest in language was awakened in the last years of my life, when I realized that hearing a language other than Greek in my mother's village is not a common experience. No one ever spoke to me about it. Neither my grandfather nor my grandmother spoke to me in Arvanitika. However, conversations between them in this language were completely normal. But somehow I perceived that they did not want me to understand them, as if it were something secret or forbidden. At a younger age, I remember asking my mother but she discouraged me from "looking it up". Growing up, the question became a spark for exploration and the documentary sprang up as an idea, as an opportunity to capture oral conversations and songs in the language, since it is not written. The videotape dialogues and songs "first hand" before they are lost forever as the Arvanites played an important role in the history of Greece. It was also the opportunity to sensitize people to the further study of Arvanites and the history of the Arvanites. It is certainly a sample of the rich material that I have collected and intend to develop.

—What were the biggest challenges during the creation of the

documentary? Was there anything that was particularly difficult for you?

The truth is that I had a hard time remembering the older people, as after our initial conversation they were unable to remember what we said and continue their thoughts. I remember specifically that I had recorded my grandmother singing an Arvanitian song. Later, in Athens, I realized that due to a technical problem, the process would need to be repeated. When I returned to the village, my grandmother did not remember that the initial recording had happened, let alone which song she sang!

—What was the reaction of the people who participated in the documentary? How did they feel when they saw your work?

It wasn't difficult to approach them at all. A short walk to the village square and an answer to the question "what kind of mind are you?" was enough for me to start talking to the grandparents about their experiences as Arvanites. They shared many personal and moving stories with me and I thank them very much for that. Many young people also had the will to contribute. Many believe that the new generation is not interested in the Arvanite language because it dominated an overwhelmingly smaller part of their lives compared to their parents and grandparents. In reality, however, thanks to the reduced contact with the language, the shame about Arvanite does not exist among young children. All that is left is great interest.

—How did they feel when they saw your work?

The reactions were only positive. They felt emotion and pride. They liked the idea that the children, let alone a child who doesn't live in the village, wanted to deepen and highlight something "theirs", something unique that sets them apart.

—What was the most important thing you learned through the process of creating the documentary?

Making the [documentary](#) was an extraordinary experience for me. I

realized that I really **The journey is more valuable than the destination**. I met many people and I learned something from each one of them. They shared with me stories, songs, customs, and even fairy tales in Arvanitika. Also **My patience was greatly practiced, a virtue that is lost in the hustle and bustle and fast pace of city life. When you work with older people, especially those who live in the countryside, you learn to follow their pace. Maybe it's not them who need to speed up, but us who need to come to terms with time.**



—What do you want to do in the future? What are your dreams? What studies/career are you thinking of pursuing?

I would like to study Anthropology in the USA and work with different cultures and civilizations. Cultural and linguistic anthropology is the focus of my goals.

—What message do you want to convey to your peers through your documentary? What do you think they can learn from the history of the Arvanitika women?

I would like to convey to my peers that **Engaging in topics they like can lead them to paths of exploration and creativity. They should not hesitate to engage in different things, it will open their horizons and develop their personality. I would like them to learn that the Arvanites played an important role in shaping the modern Greek**

state and should not bear the stigma of a minority.

The Arvanitika

—Can you briefly explain what Arvanitika is and how it evolved over the centuries?

Arvanitika is an oral, unwritten, distinct Tosk dialect of the Albanian language. In the late 12th century to the early 13th century, the Arvanites moved from Northern Epirus to Central Greece, the Morea and some islands. There they established autonomous communities and due to isolation, they preserved their language without much development to this day. This was the reason for the good preservation of their customs and traditions.

—Why is Arvanitika considered an endangered dialect and what are the main reasons for its decline?

Arvanitika is a dialect in danger of extinction as the language is only spoken and is "slowly dying out". It is unwritten and can only be learned aurally. It was spoken by older generations but was not taught to the younger ones, resulting in the loss of an entire tradition and cultural wealth that accompanies the language. After the First World War, members of Arvanitika villages began to interact more with the "outside world" and for the first time married non-Arvanits. Later, when Athenian teachers began teaching at the village school, their appointment was prohibited because they "hindered" the learning of Greek and Greek education. Of course, it is important to mention that the teachers did not know Arvanitika and often had difficulty communicating with the students. More information is provided in the [documentary](#) .

—What are the challenges of preserving Arvanitika as you encountered them during your research for the creation of the documentary?

I consider a particular challenge for the preservation of Arvanitika to be

that people who have Arvanitika as their mother tongue are slowly disappearing and with it their cultural wealth that is connected to their personal experiences but also to their language. An entire educational chapter, a book that will never be rewritten, is disappearing at an alarmingly rapid rate. A lot of precious time has been lost and with it songs and stories that no one remembers to bring back. It will be difficult to mobilize the interest of the next generation, to gather information and to start efforts to learn Arvanitika in the next 10 years. Traditional songs, foods and dances full of emotion for weddings, funerals and celebrations are being lost.

—How do Arvanitika speakers feel about the decline of the language? Is there any hope that they will manage to preserve this dialect?

The last speakers are proud of what they have experienced. They clearly regret the decline of the language and when they meet young people who are interested in learning they are always available. It is clearly very difficult to maintain, however there are rays of light that give hope, as many cultured people study the language and try in every way to rescue as many cultural elements as they can.

—How do you think documentaries and media engagement can help preserve endangered languages and dialects like Arvanitika?

I firmly believe that documentaries, publications of studies in the media and dissemination in every way contribute to the preservation of endangered dialects. Documentaries are "alive" and attract interest, but it is the media that can lead someone to discover documentaries or other similar actions.

—What impact do you hope your documentary will have on the younger generation and the future of Arvanitika?

I would be grateful if even one young person would reflect on the documentary and understand the benefits of the diversity and

uniqueness of Arvanitika and endangered languages in general.

Arvanitika: The Future

—How do you see the future of Arvanitika? Are there any ongoing efforts to revive or protect the dialect?

Efforts to revive and protect the dialect exist mainly through tradition, customs, dances and songs. The cultural association of the village, the local community, with great success organizes actions to promote the language and the Arvanites. There are also many who teach the language to their children through songs. As a next step, the publication of an Arvanite-Greek dictionary and the establishment of a language course would help. This would give hope to new Arvanite families to raise children fluent in Arvanite.

—How do you think we can encourage younger generations to engage with and learn the language of their ancestors, especially those that are in danger of disappearing?

We can encourage younger generations through the cultural actions I mentioned. **Linguistic diversity enriches the communities we live in. Showing a path of sociability, diversity and respect for uniqueness.** I would also recommend that they study the suggested lists I have in the study guide on the documentary website <https://arvanitika.eu>

Multilingual Families

—Based on the research you conducted, what advice would you give to multilingual families trying to preserve and transmit their language while living abroad?

To insist in every way on preserving their diversity, to be proud of their roots and to try to transmit their language to the younger generations alongside the language of the country they live in. The language of the country that hosts them will certainly be transmitted

while their own will only be transmitted if they speak it. It is very helpful to keep in touch with material in their language and pass it on to their children. Dubbed films, books, board games and more make learning a minority language much easier.

—What role do you think communities and local initiatives play in preserving languages?

Communities and local initiatives play a primary role in preserving languages as this is where knowledge begins and is transmitted further.

Epilogue

So, Lambrini. Such a bright Lambrini, that even from afar - me in Denmark and she in Greece - I was blinded by her light. Thank you Lambrini. Thank you for tackling something that seemed interesting to you and for sharing your experience and thoughts with us.

The language we speak at home is our treasure. No person should be ashamed of this treasure.

Watch the documentary here:

33:26

More information about Lambrini, her documentary and the Limnes of Argolida here:

[Arvanitika In Limnes](#)

[Limnon Cultural Association](#)

Love and gold dust,

Chryssa Economidou

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