

Rethinking Orthodoxy: Greek language revival in the southern Italy

Evgeniya Litvin

In Italy there are two ethnocultural minorities of Greek origin, in the provinces of Lecce and of Reggio Calabria. The progenitors of both communities came to the territory of Italy in the Byzantine period and received financial support from the Byzantine empire. Religious books, canonical dresses and priests themselves arrived from the metropoly as well. In XIV century some Greek monasteries of Salento and Calabria became famous cultural centers [Aprile 1994: 58-60]. After the fall of Constantinople the contacts are interrupted and the flows of money and goods are stopped. By the end of XVI century all the Orthodox inhabitants of the southern Italy were gradually converted to Catholicism. In the following centuries there were some attempts to use texts written in the local Greek dialect for religious purposes. Mauro Cassoni, a Dominican monk who visited Salento many times, translated a book of catholic prayers into Greek [Cassoni 1935]. There were other translations of Latin hymns such as Stabat Mater or Dies Irae, made by anonymous authors in the second half of the XIX century [Morosi 1870: 37-42]. Most probably, there were made with the scope to acquaint Greek-speaking population of these villages who hardly know any Romance languages with the Catholic tradition. During the XX century the level of language maintenance decreased significantly and, in its last decades, this situation led to different revival initiatives organized by local intellectuals and cultural centers. Part of these initiatives was related to the religious celebrations. The ways chosen by Salento and Calabrian communities in order to remember the fact of being previously Orthodox and to use the Greek language in the religious ceremonies, are different. The paper will contain the comparison between these two cases and will analyze the whole range of activities presented in both regions.