

2.8. TRADITIONAL CULTURE

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There are two main ethnographic groupings in Albania, consolidated as early as the mid-18th century, known as Gegëria that is located north of Shkumbin River and Toskëria south of it. Gegëria is comprised of Gegëria proper, Dukagjini, or Leknia, the Highlands and the Northern Coastal Fields, while Toskëria includes Toskëria proper, Myzeqeja, Labëria and Çamëria. Naturally, within these geographic regions there are other smaller subdivisions.

2.8.1. Traditional way of life

As of the Middle Ages, the settlements in Albania had achieved some stability and had well-defined boundaries separating one village from another. The boundaries were marked off by large stones driven into the ground, heaps of sods, streams or brooks and rivers, signs carved in the bark of trees in woody places and so on. Destruction of such signs and fences was considered a great offense. Villagers knew very well the boundaries of his own village and

was able to distinguish them readily by mentioning the relevant traditional toponyms, as it is common with addresses even today in cities.

The territory within the boundaries of the village used to include the grounds around the dwellings, courtyards and gardens. The land and territory division by property was followed with agriculture and upward with the pastures and parts of the mountain forest belonging to the village. In many parts of Albania, such a division of village territories remained strictly unchanged until the years of the World War I, especially in districts where free peasantry lived. Only yards and gardens of the dwelling houses were under complete private ownership of the peasant, for the sown lands were at his disposal only for the period they were under cultivation. After agricultural crops were collected, lands were cleared out and anyone could release his flocks to graze in them. Other lands that had been exploited collectively, that is, in common, were left fallow and as winter pastures, but water sources, in particular, that were used to irrigate the sown lands, were exploited according to strictly scheduled turns for each family.



"Folk Games" by
Abdurrahim Buza, oil on
canvas, 1971



Husband and wife in
Tepelena folk customs



Albanian warrior late
19th century



Women in traditional
costumes



Çam Dancing couple in
folk costumes

Rural settlements, in general, have been suited to the climate and terrain in which they were located. The plain villages are those of coastal lowlands along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, while higher villages can reach 1,400 metres above sea level and are situated in the Korçë and Kukës districts. In any given village the dwellings might be neatly arranged or scattered about, and in some regions they happened to be very scattered. The villages, no matter how scattered, all had a social centre around which people's activity would gravitate during leisure time and such a centre could either have been a small square near a centuries-old Plane tree, or the shop of some grocer, or the courtyard of any cult building (church or mosque). In the second half of the 20th century, many social and cultural buildings such as schools, kindergardens, cultural halls and centres and shopping units were added to the existing stock of buildings.

From historians' estimates it has been determined that in the 14th century, the average number of houses per Albanian village was 21, with the highest average in Elbasan district at 38 houses per village, followed by Korçë district with 28 houses per village. Until the first quarter of the 20th century, about 80% of the population worked and lived in villages, with most villages having roughly 20 houses each, and 30% of Albanian villages having around 1,000 inhabitants each. During the communist regime, the percentage of rural population compared to the whole population fell to 64%, though the government at the time aimed at not abandoning the rural areas.

In the 20th century, particularly the years after World War I, the rural way of life in Albania underwent some important changes. In family life, as in social life, certain popular feasts dealing with various forms of entertainment were kept. Much of the intangible heritage, safeguarded in people's consciousness, manifested in the oral and musical folklore of various regions, particularly in the legendary and historical epic. Although new ideas and tastes were constantly invading the old ways through the novel means of mass communications, much of the old culture was preserved.

Albanian traditional family used to be an important "enterprise" consisting of several small families (sons of a family) lead by the main family (father and mother). Sometimes this was with three vertical hierarchic scales and other horizontal ones if there was a grandfather still alive with his several

sons living in the same big house. This was typical for village families and especially those in mountain areas. In such families there were strict rules about the division of labour and duties for all the members. As well, former customs and norms of family life, including pagan practices and rites, were preserved for a longer time.

After the start of urbanization, between WWI and WWII, this “traditional family” type started to shrink gradually with decrease of rural population and increase the city ones.

As regards to its main structure, now most of the families, in urban or rural areas, appears to be quite simplified consisting of the married couple with their unmarried children. . Generally married young men, soon after marriage, are separated from the parents’ family and live on their own. However in many cases the youngest son (but also the girl) remains in the parents’ household to live with them mainly because of low living standards(i.e no money to buy a new flat). As such, the average number of members per family is 5 to 6 people, but in some villages this average is lower.

In beliefs involving life cycles, (births, marriages and deaths), scholars have been able to find ancient rites which though atypical, continue to exist in small enclaves throughout Albania. These are generally rites used to wish prosperity for both the married and the newly married couples and to promote fertility, for male offspring in particular. As to death customs, it is worthy to note that until World War II the lamentation with “dirges” (funeral songs) was still preserved in certain regions.

Numerous rites and beliefs are connected with certain dates in an old folk calendar and according to researchers, they have to do with ancient pastoral and farm cults. For example, the Day of Summer (14 March), or March the First, was characterized by a general clean-up of houses and courtyards. The collected rubbish was then burned, and on the same fire old brooms were thrown to begin the new season with new brooms, so a ritual purification is involved. Formerly, the coming of Day of Summer was looked forward to joyfully across villages, particularly by children. St. George’s Day (April 23) was also a feast accompanied by amusing rites and practices. Bonfires built across courtyards and crossroads on June 22, St. John’s Day, created an atmosphere of joy and gaiety. Formerly very interesting rites accompanied the Christian holiday season (“buzmi”) across highlands on the eve of winter solstice.



Laberia Men in village
convent end of XIX century
folk costumes



Women in Has, north
Albania

Many seasonal celebrations were connected with certain established weeks in farming and stock-raising, such as the completion of harvests, shearing of sheep, the return of shepherds from summer pastures, and so on.

2.8.2. Myths and popular beliefs

Obviously, myths, superstitions and religious beliefs have constituted an interesting aspect of the Albanian folk culture. It is historically known that Christianity began to spread illegally in Illyria as early as the 1st century A.D. Evangelization was first begun by St.

Paul and accomplished by Latin missionaries. This explains why Christian terminology in the Albanian language has Latin roots. With the spreading of Islam, particularly beginning in 17th century, certain special occurrences emerged, such as the crypto-Christianity (secret practice of Christianity) in some villages of Elbasan district (in the Shpati region), which continued until the Proclamation of Independence in 1912. In the 19th century, however, even in some areas of Northern Albania such as Lura, there were families with mixed religious views: some of them were partly Catholic and partly Muslim. Since World War I, the number of families that do not regularly observe religious practices has been increasing. In this historical context it is not difficult to understand how it became possible that a mixture of ancient pagan rites with elements of both Christianity and Islam came to be preserved together and in full harmony.



Group of Narta girls in folk custom



Young girls in folk customs

Çuka e Tomorrit and Këndravica to name a few. During these feasts, bonfires were built in waiting for the sun to rise and it was believed

Among ancient myths that were preserved until the 20th century was the *Cult of the Sun*. It bears links to the cult of *fire and hearth*, on the one hand because the sun itself was a source of light and warmth, and the cults of the farm and livestock on the other, because the life of any creature on earth depends on the sun. Likewise, the holding of certain mountain peaks in veneration was also preserved, which were worshipped as “*sun peaks*”. On fixed dates, pilgrimages were made to certain mountain peaks, such as to Maja (Peak) e Rumies, Gjalica e Lumës,

that fires added to the sun's strength. Not coincidentally, the most severe curse to the hero's adversary in legendary epic was "May your sun's share be lost to you".

In many Albanian regions, traces of a "cult of snake" have been found, particularly that of the grass snake that was believed to be a protective deity. The snake cult was well known to ancient Illyrians as well, particularly to the Dalmatians. In former times, people in the highlands believed that every house had a protective snake.

In legendary epics, mention is made also of other protective mythological figures of man, such as oreads, fairies and *dryads* (*oak tree nymph*). An oread could take under her protection a person or a family or even a whole tribe. Fairies were beautiful women, but they were valiant and combatant as well. It was believed that they lived in caves, deep in forests, and rested under shades by the brooks or on mountain peaks. Scholars of mythology hold that a fairy bears links to an Illyrian deity of forests and fountains that in the Roman variant was called Diana.

The Dragon was imagined as a supernatural creature, with extraordinary strengths. His principal exploit was to free the water being occupied by Hydra. It was believed that dragons fought mostly in times of great hurricanes and used to employ maces, spears and arrows, perforated stones and, in particular, ploughs and yokes. They were able to pull big trees and boulders out of mountains.

The mythological creature of Hydra was imagined as the embodiment of blind destructive elements of nature. She was said to be a big snake with 3, 7, 9 or 12 heads breathing out fire. She liked to accommodate herself by the fountains where she would stop the flow of water causing people to suffer.

The rich Albanian mythology combined with intensive history of Albania brought about the creation of special articulated traditional culture strata such as Epos of Albanians which is presented in chapter 2.9 of this publication.

2.8.3. Handicraft

The production of artistic handicrafts is based on ancient Illyrian and Albanian tradition. The development during the three to four last centuries in Albania has been closely linked with historical and social conditions of the country, such as its long Ottoman occupation that generated impact at religious and cultural levels. The best of Ottoman culture found good basis in Albania to develop the flourishing of "Albanian Ottoman" arts in many fields, as in monumental architecture (towns of Gjirokaster and Berat are both noted for "Otto-



Women's necklace from
North Albania



Laberia region man
belongings : Spade, pistol,
bullets container, inkpot,
end of XIX century



Artisan craftsmen working in Bazar (Market) of Shkodra. Photo by Marubi, 1900

those of Dukagjin, Pukë and Mirditë, or cradles for babies, musical instruments and particularly trousseau chests.

In some regions of the country, woodcraft reached the level of an artistic craftsmanship. From the period between the 13th and 19th



Interior of "Guests Room" in Gjirokastra

centuries there are preserved samples of perfect woodworks such as the interiors of cult buildings, interiors of rural and urban dwelling houses and more. One of the most superb examples is the iconostasis of the Orthodox Church of the village Leusë in Përmet, which had been crafted at the end of the 18th century. One can notice in this piece, how the foliage background is dominating, but together with abundant

leaves and branches there is an intertwining of realistic and imaginary animal figures, birds and various Christian religious symbols.

Distinguished workings on wood can also be found in interiors of houses, notably on ceilings, built-in cupboards, window covers and lattice-windows in such cities as Gjirokastër, Berat, Elbasan, Shkodër and Prizren in Kosovo.



Traditional Albanian carpet

The tradition of working silver was full booming during the 17th and 18th centuries. Museum collections of silver objects with dated inscriptions and origin from various urban centres of the country such as Shkodër, Elbasan, Berat and Voskopojë have been preserved. In many cases they are distinguished by a high artistic quality, and are in both cult objects such as crucifixes, wine cups and gospel covers, or secular objects such as body ornaments and house equipment.

man" architecture and now are defended by UNESCO World Heritage).

In the Albanian countryside, the tradition of working out and adorning small objects of wood by villagers for the needs of everyday life was practiced and kept alive until the first half of the 20th century. Shepherds used to make crooks, wooden bowls, spindles, distaffs (a tool for spinning), etc. Other villagers, more experienced, used to work out stools and chairs in traditional patterns, such as

In cities during the 18th and 19th centuries, master silversmiths practiced the coating with silver of rifles, pistols, yataghans (a Turkish sword) and cartridge-boxes. These items were regarded as necessary outfits for any man and are now housed in museums across the country. A number of them are coated with gold.

Among all silver objects wrought in various techniques (beating, casting, etc.), a special fineness represents the working on delicate filigrees, a specialty of master silversmiths particularly in northern towns.

For centuries, peasant women in Albania have occupied themselves with weaving various types of cloth to use for wearing, or as household equipment (mattresses, towels, beddings, covers, napkins, table-cloths, etc.).

In Albania, various kinds of silk fabric have been worked and used more than in other Balkan countries, perhaps because the climate favoured the cultivation of silkworms, and in many regions the white mulberry was widely spread.

Woolen textiles, like carpets are produced with a series of different techniques, were widely used and carried a great many local features which made the works of one region distinguishable from those of another.

Other interesting handwork includes various styles of knitting with pins, laceworks and needlework. Of note are the multifarious embroideries, which range from the simple rural embroideries worked by peasant women, to the wonderful virtuosic embroideries worked out with silk or gold threads by master embroiderers, even at monasteries of the time. Among various pieces of such works only rare examples exist, as is the case with the prodigious *Stole of Glavenica* (near Berat) dating from 1373, and some other secular and religious pieces also, which have embroidery of particular interest.

2.8.4. Traditional costumes

Folk dresses (garment, cloth) are obviously one of the most expressive manifestations of traditional culture. They inherit and convey many elements that come down from ancient times and Middle Ages, but at the same time they are an expression of cultural relations with other peoples over centuries. Byron, the famous British poet of the 19th century, had taken with him more than one Albanian folk costume as precious artworks to dress himself with and to expose to the world.

The principal types of Albanian popular costumes for men include *the kilted costume*, the costume with a *long shirt and a dolman* (cape), the *costume with pantaloons* and the *costume with breeches*



Woolen textiles of south
Albania



Woman Waist coat and
moccassins (opinga)

or something like knickers (short trousers to the knee). In Albanian villages men have been wearing garments both in the shape of a wide skirt and the shape of trousers, the first type going out of style earlier than the rest. The most adorned parts were the waistcoats and vests as part of the festive costumes. Albanian men have also been wearing various silver ornaments, such as breast pads, decorated buttons on vests, rings, pipes and cigarette boxes, but above all, their fighting arms (swords, knives and guns) were invariably richly ornamented.

For women, principal types of dresses included the costume made up of a *sleeveless smock* with a bell-shaped lower part; the costume made up of a *long gown* above which a kersey jerkin was



Northern country
men, circa 1910



Gjirokastra woman



Catholic woman
from Shkodra



Orthodox woman
from Shkodra



City woman from
Shkodra

worn; the costume made up of *two aprons placed on a long shirt* with one worn on the front part of the body and the other behind it, and the costume made up of a *loose garment*, essentially an open skirt, tucked up at the waist forming crumples or pleats).



Southern Albanian warrior

In connection with the appearance of garments, colours and ornaments vary with the ages of wearers. For young people and children the regional costume might be simpler. Unlike with other peoples of the Balkans, the girl in Albania that reaches the age of marriage may be dressed simply and without special ornaments. Her hair may be carefully covered with a headkerchief and ought not to wear red dresses.

The marriage suit is the richest variant both for brides and bridegrooms. For brides, metallic ornaments have been ever present, indeed, they were used to some excess, because as regards this matter, what counted was not their aesthetic function only, but also the magic func-

tion attributed to it. Special importance was the attached to adorning the head of the bride. In the years after the marriage, their garments would become lightened of ornaments.

According to the customs, they dressed also the dead with the best clothes. Since mourning was the part done by women their dress was mainly in black but rich in ornaments. Men costumes for these mourning days are selected mainly with only black and white colors

The studies carried out so far have shown that component parts of traditional garments are not all of the same age. There are parts and reminiscent of medieval clothes, with Byzantine and Oriental influences, and others coming down as an echo of ancient times that can be connected with Illyrian culture. In this respect



"Preparing the bride"-
Albanian wedding, by Pajo
Jovanociv (1859- 1957)

we can mention the analogies observed between the folk line and the Illyrian "Dalmatics", or between the hoods, scarves (shawls), moccasins, etc. and the respective elements used by Illyrians. Owing to such elements inherited from the Illyrian culture and that of the Arbërs of the Middle Ages during their historic development, folk clothes have come to gain a series of original traits that assume values of an ethnic indicator, which distinguishes Albanian clothing used from that of other nations.

Outstanding figures of world literature have also taken special interest in Albanian traditional garments and clothing. Among them is the famous poet George Byron (Lord Byron), who has even been called "the discoverer of Albanian subjects".

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