

MEETING UNDER THE PLANE TREE: VIOLATION OR UPHOLDING OF TRADITION? THE RITUAL YEAR AMONG THE HIMARA GREEKS

Alexander Novik

*Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of
the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia*

e-mail: njual@mail.ru, novik.petersburg@gmail.com

Abstract: This study is dedicated to analysing the Himariot tradition of villagers meeting for coffee in the main square for the celebration of important feasts or family occasions. The cultural code of the population of Himara, which consists mostly of Orthodox Greeks and Orthodox and Muslim Albanians, has undergone major transformation in the twentieth century due to social and political reasons, including the persecution of religious institutions which reached its peak in the 1960s. Churches, formerly the main place for celebrating main feasts and family ceremonies as well as exchanging local news, were closed or destroyed. Instead, the *café/kafenio/lokal* in the center of the village (usually near the closed-down church) became the sacred meeting place for the villagers, while the barman/waiter/cook became the gatekeeper (according to the gatekeeping theory supported by the author), who allowed or refused to grant community members entrance to the inner circle (those who make the decision for the entire community). The transformations in the 1990s and 2000s gave a start to new or forgotten ritual practices and pastimes, as well as an entirely new organization of community life. The change of ritual practices was considerably influenced by: 1) the factor of prestige of the sacred locus in the people's mind; 2) the

revitalization of tradition starting in case of an intrusion in the people's ritual sphere; 3) a conscious or unconscious wish of many of the communities to museify the past, in spite of the challenges of the present.

Keywords: Albania, gatekeeping, Greek identity, Himariot tradition, meeting for coffee, museification, revitalization, ritual event

Introduction

The twenty-first century is marked by innovative processes in the sphere of politics, economics, social relations, traditional culture, etc. in the Western Balkans. We can observe huge transformations of ritual code and popular beliefs throughout the recent decades (Ceribašić 2005: 9–38; Tirta 2004; 2006; Stublla 2007; Sedakova 2008; Anastasova 2011; Doja & Abazi 2021).

The Greeks and Albanians of Himara have a longstanding ritual of visiting the café of the village or the quarter to meet with friends and relations. As a rule, such meetings are only attended by men. Their meeting place is usually the nearest café (Greek *kafenio*, Alb. *lokal*, *-i*) in the quarter. They go there after breakfast, formally for coffee and informally – to discuss the latest news, exchange opinions, and solve the relevant problems of the local community (Novik 2015a; 2017b; 2019a).

The established order is broken on the days that formerly (before the suppression of religion started by the atheist Albanian government in the 1940–1950s) called for going to the Orthodox church. When all religious buildings were closed in 1967 (they remained closed until the early 1990s), people began to gather in the main square, but in the café instead of the church (the cafés were never closed by the government).¹ The ban on celebrating religious feasts led to the transformation of such feasts into meetings for coffee. Just like in the case of festive church services, women can take part in these events as well. Plane tree became the symbol of such ceremonies: traditionally, every Greek village on the Ionian Coast has a plane tree planted in its center, so it is viewed there as a specific marker of a Greek-speaking locality (such trees can be encountered in the Albanian-speaking villages of the region as well, but there they are not considered a necessary element of the public space) (cf. Billa 2020).

Plane trees are our Greek trees. Where a plane tree grows, it means there are Greeks living there. You can see it in every Greek village. Next to the

church, and where the church is there's also the kafenio. We can't do without it. We celebrate all our important occasions under the plane tree.
(Informant – a Greek man from Palasa, 85, recorded in 2019)

With the advance of democracy in Albania in the early 1990s, this tradition did not change but rather got even stronger. No engagement or marriage settlement is considered legally binding if it has not been announced before the villagers “under the plane tree” (Novik 2019b: 53).

This study is based on the field work I carried out in the Western Balkans in 1992–2021, as well as on the analysis of ethnographic, folklore, and historic records housed in the archives of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies and the Institute of Linguistics and Literature of the Academy of Sciences of Albania.

As for the theoretical aspect, I rely on the gatekeeping theory, using it to analyze the anthropological data (Erickson & Shultz 1982; Coltrane 1996; Roberts & Sayers 1998; Gold 1999; Johnston 2007; Menezes et al. 2016). Interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have a rich literature on institutional gatekeeping.² In the field of sociolinguistics, institutional gatekeeping has come to mean “any situation in which an institutional member is empowered to make decisions affecting others” (Scollon 1981: 4; Johnston 2007: 166). Celia Robert and Pete Sayers refer to gatekeepers as to “people who hold certain resources, facilities or opportunities, and who decide, within the constraints of the organization they represent, who should have them – who should be allowed through the ‘gate’” (Roberts & Sayers 1998: 25).

I also made use of the theoretical works of cultural and social anthropologists who have researched Greek, Bulgarian, Italian, and other cultures’ ritual events (Bauman 1992; Kapchan & Turner Strong 1999; Todorova 2006 [1993]; Kaser 2008; Duranti 2018; Nail 2019; Salazar 2022). The main methodological principles underlying the study are the descriptive, typological, and comparative approaches. Looking at the meeting under the plane tree as at a ritual event in a particular sociohistorical setting in the Western Balkans, I treated the collective actions of actors involved in the traditional practice as a phenomenon of cultural memory and result of society transformation.

The principal methods employed were structural and functional analysis. A historical approach allowed me to reveal the main routes of the genesis of the ritual events and the evolution of folk beliefs and representations.

Historical overview

The Ionian Coast of Albania is a narrow strap of coastal lowland, broken by rocky ledges, about 50 km long and 10 km wide (Billa 2020; INSTAT 2022). It is separated from the neighboring *krahinas* of the country (Alb. *krahin/ë*, -a ‘historical and ethnographic district’) by mountain ridges. The sea separates the territory from the Ionian Islands of Greece and from the region of Puglia in Southern Italy. In Albania, the territory is traditionally called *krahina e Himarës* ‘the krahina of Himara’ (by its main town, Himara) or simply *Himara*, or likewise *Bregu i Detit* (Alb. ‘seacoast’) (Elsie 2015). Colloquially the region is often dubbed *Deti Jon* (Alb. ‘the Ionian Sea’).

According to the Institute of Statistics of Albania, which provides data on the official administrative structure of the country, there are nine villages in the region, besides its administrative center, the town Himara: Palasë, Gjileka, Dhërmi (Fig. 1), Vuno, Qeparo Fushë, Qeparo Fshat, Kudhës, Pilur, Iliaz (Censusi i popullsisë dhe banesave 2011; INSTAT 2022).

Since Albania declared its independence in 1912, the territory has belonged to the Albanian state. The population is highly diverse ethnically: among the residents of Himara, there are Orthodox Albanians and Greeks and Muslim Albanians (Sunni and Bektashi). In addition, in recent years there have appeared groups of Romani population who practice Islam (Nasi et al. 2004; Novik & Sobolev 2018; Novik 2019b: 30).



Figure 1. Dhërmi. September 2017. Photograph by Alexander Novik. Personal archive.

For the Greeks of the region, it has always been important to underline their family's Greek ancestry and the fact that they spoke their native language (Novik 2019a). However, the Greeks of Himara have had to study Albanian, so code-switching is characteristic of them in daily life (Joseph et al. 2019). Meanwhile, some of the Albanians have studied Greek due to living side by side with Greeks for such a long time.

Of course, the level of Greek proficiency is currently different among the region's population. For example, there had previously been Greek schools in the villages, teaching Greek children, who therefore used the Greek language outside their family circle from a very young age. Furthermore, the villages were not completely open to the outsiders. For example, if somebody sold their house, the rest of the villagers discussed the potential buyer and could forbid one to buy a house in their village (such a situation has been and still is common to most of Albania's *krahinas*) (Novik & Oleksiuk 2020). After World War II, the lessons at school were mostly taught in Albanian. It led to a very difficult sociolinguistic and ethnocultural situation when the majority of the Himariots identify themselves as having multiple native languages and cultural codes (which complement rather than cancel out each other).

Café/*kafenio*/*lokal* in the hierarchy of common values

In Himara, like in the rest of Albania, there are many food service businesses. The most common type of a village coffee house on the Ionian Coast of Albania is the *lokal*, combining the functions of the bar, the café, and the minimarket, the main place to spend one's free time and exchange news. It should be noted that such functions are characteristic to practically all the food service facilities in rural Albania (Novik 2015a; 2019a).

Usually, before the establishment of the regime of monism in 1944, the *lokal* was opened in the neighborhood of the village or town church (Fig. 2). If there were several catering establishments in the locality, the most important one was the one located at the side of the main church (frequently, a village could have multiple religious buildings). The church services, festive events, wedding ceremonies etc. ensured an influx of visitors for the *lokal* – both the believers who attended the church and those who were simply curious about the goings-on in the village.



Figure 2. Orthodox church. Palasa. September 2017. Photograph by Alexander Novik. Personal archive.

The changes in the society structure and political regime did not affect the strategy of choosing the main place for collective meetings. The new government realized it would be practical to keep the *lokal* in its former locus, though as nationalized property this time. The same method was used by the Ottoman conquerors of the Balkans, who saw the prospects of the economy which remained from the Byzantine Empire and did not destroy the established professional institutions, the source of income for the sultans' treasury (Shkodra 1973: 58–61).

Socialism brought along an important innovation, namely the change of the key figure in the *lokal* – instead of the owner, the manager was now a hired employee, and now it was not unusual for the latter to be a woman. His/her role can be interpreted as gatekeeper, in accordance with the gatekeeping theory (cf. Johnston 2007). For the village community, the bartender/salesman became

the person who allowed or blocked the access to necessary services, rare goods, connections/networks, and, most importantly, the chance to rise in the village hierarchy (since the community's verdict on one's abilities, reputation, and authority depended in no small part on one's role and position in the *lokal*).

The advent of democracy in Albania in the early 1990s led to cardinal transformations of the political, economic, religious, and cultural life in the country. The established structure of life underwent drastic changes. Planned economy, with its strict instructions and total ban on private businesses was replaced by market relations (Smirnova 2003: 381–390). The sales and catering facilities that had been controlled by respective government departments were closed, and the premises handed over to the former owners or their heirs (the Albanian legal system allows for restitution) or sold to new businessmen. However, with all the changes in property rights and interactions with the government, the *lokal* stayed the main meeting place for the villagers in their values hierarchy and therefore had a great influence on the collective plans and decisions of the community.

Ritual event vs. gender

Women in Himara have always enjoyed a larger degree of freedom than their compatriots from the neighboring *krahinas*, primarily Laberia. It is evidenced both by the sources available to the reader (Nasi et al. 2004; Elsie 2015; Joseph et al. 2019) and by my own field materials gathered in 1994–2021. The freedom was defined by my interlocutors as participation in making decisions related to the family budget, inclusion in social and professional life, and a special part in preparing the cultural events in the community as well as the festive and household rituals (Novik 2015a; 2019a).

Among the causes of such a situation, besides the religious factor (the majority of Laberia Albanians are Muslim, while the Greeks and part of the Albanians of Himara are Orthodox Christians), are the social, economic and cultural traditions and paradigms of the region. For example, the Greek-speaking residents of Himara have never given their daughters in marriage to the Albanians from Laberia – they believe that such a misalliance would hurt the family's reputation, adding that their daughters “might end up leading a very uncomfortable life, and they are used to welfare and freedom” (Novik 2017a: 14).

At the same time, it was very rare for Himariot men to marry women from Laberia. The Himariots viewed such marriages as non-prestigious. There was no official ban on such unions (the way it was with arranging marriages “beyond the mountain” for the daughters), but the community’s opinion defined their own status as higher than that of their neighbors. The situation began to change during the socialistic regime in Albania (1944–1991), when the equality of all citizens regardless of their regional and ethnic origins was not only declared by the government but actively enforced as a social practice, while the religious barriers were removed due to “a drastic solution for the entire question” (Smirnova 2003: 280–281).

In the localities of Himara, women frequently had the last word in household matters, while their husbands took care of the family business or, being merchants or fishermen, left on lengthy voyages. The break with tradition concerning the division of labor and the economic system itself occurred after World War II. The building of socialism brought to a complete transformation of the paradigm of the social order. Private businesses became nationalized, the ownership of farmlands, pastures etc. was transferred to the community; men began working for collective farming enterprises (cooperatives) or at state-owned factories, and women started to work on par with men – the government of Albania declared full equality when it came to labor activity (cf. Corbett 1991).

If working at the local café or restaurant used to be a purely male occupation before that, after the socialist transformations it was not rare to have a woman behind the counter of the village bar or shop. This situation caused no protest, since people connected it to the mood of the times dictated from the center rather than to a degradation of a many-century tradition (cf. Coltrane 1996; Kaser 2008).

Himara is one of the country’s regions whose residents migrated abroad (mainly to Greece) in large numbers in the early 1990s. For a while, only the elderly women, tasked with watching over the property, were left in the coastal zone. At that time, many localities had no working *lokal* since there was nobody to visit them. A while later, the local residents began to come back from their labor migration, and life gradually began to come back to normal. Catering facilities started to open in practically every locality. They were often controlled by women whose husbands and sons had other jobs or continued to live and work abroad (Novik & Oleksiuk 2020).

For a long time, as it was mentioned before, visiting the *lokal* was an event purely for the men. As a rule, it has stayed this way. Men spending time together at the village café remains one of the signature types of leisure. At the same moment, there has lately been a change in this pattern. In case of important family events (engagement, wedding, jubilee, etc.) or celebrations (the main ones among these are Easter, Christmas, St. George's Day, St. Demetrios' Day etc.), when a man goes "under the plane tree", he can take his wife with him (Novik 2019b). A woman would almost never go to such an establishment – this taboo is controlled by public opinion. However, a female owner of the catering facility can serve a fully male company of visitors. Nowadays, a group of young female friends (but never one girl by herself!) can go for a coffee to the *lokal*. Married women usually meet at their houses and would not go to the public place which the community has reserved for men. In this aspect, Himara is different from the rest of Albania – in other regions, women of any age almost never visit food establishments unaccompanied by men. The Himariots explain it by saying "Our women have always been freer than the wives and daughters of our neighbors" (ibid.).

Café owner = gatekeeper?

As the localities started to revive after the shocks of the late twentieth – early twenty-first century, the *lokal* began to play the same part it played in the period of the republic, the kingdom, the Italian and German occupation, and, to some extent, the period of monism (Elsie 2004). As opposed to the latter, today's functioning of catering establishments is characterized by the fact that the *kafenio's* owner is not a hired employee at all. He does not depend on the government of the region and the village, the party leaders, or the headquarters of the farming cooperative. The owner has a much larger authority and therefore the rights of admitting or forbidding a client's entrance to the sacred locus for the inner circle. Compared to the situation of the first half of the twentieth century, the owner has a higher standing in the community, since he is not rivaled by the clergy. After the renewal of religious life in the *krahina*, the churches have not returned to the level of activity that used to be there before the atheistic campaign of Enver Hoxha (1944–1985).³ In the majority of Himara's restored churches services are conducted by priests who arrive

from the town on major feast days. For the rest of the time the *lokal* remains the main center of ritual events.

For example, in the village of Palasa, where I have conducted my studies for many years, according to the informants, an engagement or marriage is not considered valid if people have not been informed of it during their gathering at the *lokal* near the church in the village's main square.

We have had it like this for ages. If two families agreed on their children marrying, they always announced it after the service right in the church and then went to the kafenio nearby. Earlier, people used to go to church on Sundays. And after the church they went to sit at the neighboring kafenio. The men could drink rakia. Some drank coffee. In the years of socialism, the church was closed. But the entire village still came to the café under the plane tree every Sunday. When I decided to get married, I announced it to the locals at that same place. You can't neglect to do it! Otherwise, they won't accept it. I went and announced it. It's still like this. If you want acceptance, do what the ancestors have done. (Informant – a Greek man from Palasa, 85, recorded in 2019)

The return of the food establishment as the main place to meet and celebrate ritual events is viewed by the locals as a positive development, in many ways an innovational one, made possible by the radical transformations of the Albanian society. Other informants have told me that they see it as the return of a tradition that had existed for many years but was broken due to political and other reasons. For the ritual year that defines the Himariots' life, the place under the plane tree (Fig. 3) remains a sacred locus which marks the continuity of tradition and respect for the ancestral heritage (Novik 2019).



Figure 3. Plane tree. Palasa. September 2017. Photograph by Alexander Novik. Personal archive.

As we can see, over the course of the twentieth century the role of the place under the plane tree in the ritual life of Himara villages transformed four times. Before the establishment of monism in 1944, the *lokal* was a secondary locus, where only the community news that was usually previously announced in church was discussed. The Church held the highest authority, and the ritual year was planned according to the calendar offered by the priests and the order fixed by tradition (cf. Litsios 2008). The revolutionary events and the flow of changes in the social, political, and economic life in Albania weakened the institution of the Church, and after 1967 it was brought down almost completely (Smirnova 2003; Billa 2020). During that period the announcements that used to be made at church (of engagements, wedding, celebrations of important events, etc.) began to occur at the place that had been a secondary one before – namely, the *lokal*. The food establishment gradually became the sacred locus that assumed the function of the village church, coordinating the ritual events. In this period, the role of the *lokal's* bartender in the community begins to strengthen as he becomes a sort of gatekeeper. The collapse of socialism in

Albania leads to the prestige of the place under the plane tree diminishing for a short while: first, the institution of the Church gets restored, second, catering establishments are now being opened, according to the mechanics of the market, almost in every quarter of any locality. However, as time has shown, neither the Church as an institution nor private businesses with their different products and service varieties could compete with the authority of the “village club”, the *kafenio*, already established in the mind of the community. In most of the villages of Himara church services are conducted very rarely, according to a preset timetable, by priests who come from the city, while in their absence informing the villagers about the upcoming feasts and ceremonies is done by the owner or the employee of the *kafenio* (Novik 2015a; 2019a). As for the various cafés, bars etc. that have opened massively in recent years, they cannot compete with the historical places under the plane tree: the mind of the local community, aiming to museify the past, views only the *kafenio* near the main church as the traditional and true one. Any ritual act is considered important and sanctified by tradition no sooner than it undergoes initiation at the place which is sacred to the community.

Memory and museification of ritual space

Among the markers of museification (cf. Ceribašić 2005; Duranti 2018), one can name the desire to keep the looks and furnishings of the place under the plane tree precisely the same as it used to be, according to the current owners and their key clients, “in the good old times”. This can mean a thoroughly unattractive design from the times of Enver Hoxha, old furniture, odd decorations such as the photos of celebrities of the past, boomboxes, and other artefacts to impress the memory and mind of the regulars. Such socialistic romanticism, of course, has nothing to do with the interior of the *kafenio* in the first half of the twentieth century – the time often referred to by a part of our informants who long for the olden days. But it definitely shows that the local population feels nostalgia for the period of socialism, which is sharply criticized by the government and by most of the mass media.

It ends up in a paradoxical situation: a period of militant atheism which succeeded the time of religious freedom and liberalism becomes an example

for people and is connected, in their minds, with the better times (cf. Forry 1986; Zebec 2002).

To conclude, nowadays, to get the approval of the community for important family ceremonies or festive events, one needs to be supported by the village café's regulars rather than by the village priest or head of the village administration. Although it is not a rare occasion for the place under the plane tree to belong to the village head, which makes the distinction between the head of the administration and the village bartender irrelevant (Novik 2019b).

The place under the plane tree vs. tourism

On the Ionian Coast of Albania, most of the food establishments that opened after the 2000s are aimed at the tourists who come to the seaside. Most of these tourists are Albanians from other parts of the country, Kosovo, North Macedonia, to a lesser extent from Montenegro, as well as representatives of the Albanian diaspora residing (according to the statistics, in descending order) in Greece, Italy, Germany, France, etc. (INSTAT 2022). Every year, there is an increased flow of foreign tourists from Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Russia, and other countries. However, like in the rest of Southern and South-eastern Europe, the tourism season has dwindled to two months or even one (July–August) rather than lasting from May till September as it used to just two decades ago (as commented on by hotel and restaurant managers in Croatia, Montenegro, and Greece) (Novik 2016a; 2019a; 2021a). To survive in the new conditions, the owners of cafés and restaurants have to use various tricks to attract clients (cf. Franklin 2001: 211–232). However, the majority of cafés, restaurants, hotels and bed-and-breakfasts have to close to avoid losing money on wages for the staff, the electricity bills etc. The only establishments remaining open are those aimed at the locals themselves, namely the traditional *kafenios* under the plane tree. They do not usually attract tourists' attention, since their location is unappealing from a visitor's point of view: they are situated not on the seashore or at some venue with a beautiful view of the mountains but in the center of the village, historically marked by the church (which is relatively rarely visited by the average tourist due to its poor condition, a result of the lack of money).

In the cases when the historical *kafenio* is located in a beautiful place, for example, in the villages of Dhërmi or Qeparo, the tourists, as a rule, still prefer the more attractive establishments – in the tourist zone, there are usually many restaurants and cafés. Meanwhile, a historical *kafenio* does not always strive for renovation, change of furnishings, new designs etc.

For the tourist, an additional important factor in choosing the place to go for a coffee or a snack is related to the patrons of the establishment. The *kafenio* under the plane tree is always frequented by its regulars, who, as a rule, are elderly men engaged in lively discussions and often heated arguments. (The phenomenon of the loud conversations and the passionate nature of the discussions led at the table is commented upon by practically everyone who visits the Balkans; this topic merits a separate commentary which is not among the aims of this study.) Often their looks scare away the foreign tourists – they are afraid to become the focus of attentive glances and the topic of discussion in a language or languages they do not understand, so they prefer to pick a calmer establishment (cf. Duranti 1997).

Another factor is the choice of the suitable staff. In the numerous cafés opened in recent years, the bartenders, waiters, and cooks are young men who generally arrive from other regions of Albania where it is hard to find a job. The local youth rarely apply for such jobs, since their families often own businesses or have other sources of income – as for the Greek-speaking residents of Himara, their business is connected, to one degree or another, with Greece. The young people who come from other regions look fashionable – the bartenders and others are often flamboyantly dressed, have hippie-like haircuts and multiple tattoos. It serves as an additional motivation for the tourists to visit such establishment, since most of the foreigners who come to the south of Albania are young men, students, freelancers etc. rather than right-minded retired people, families with children etc. who make up the majority of tourists in other regions of Europe (it is first of all due to the country's established image as a “dangerous”, “Muslim” and “Communist” one). As a result, it is visited by those who are willing to risk going to the unknown Balkan regions which haven't yet been actively promoted by tourism agencies.

As for the locals, they generally avoid the establishments for tourists – they do not like the patrons (“Look how horrid those people are, and how they behave!”, “They are dressed so terribly, and the girls are just shameless!”), they are scared off by the prices (“The prices are so awfully high”, “Everything's for

the tourists”), or they are put off by the lack of conversation partners (“What’s there to do? One can’t even talk to anyone, just a waste of time”). As a result, they conclude: “The best is to go under the plane tree! There are our own people, and we can learn the news, and we won’t have to empty our pockets” (Novik 2015a; 2019a; 2021a).

The owners of the *kafenios* do not earn as much as the owners of tourist-oriented establishments. Often the former barely make a profit, but they have a job that they view as extremely important socially for the community all year round. As for the owners of the food establishments for tourists, after opening up by the end of May they already have to close, with rare exceptions, early in September. The “ritual year” is very short for them, and it is followed by a long pause caused by objective reasons, namely the world tourism strategies (in many countries of the region, employees have vacations in no month other than August; Italy and Kosovo have long provided vacations in August only).

Gatekeeper vs. leader & businessman/businesswoman

It is very difficult to make any changes in this system: it is not enough, to put it metaphorically, to plant a plane tree near the entrance of your establishment to ensure the locals would regularly visit it. They can come to you out of curiosity and have a look around, but then people would go on to visit the *kafenio* that they are used to and that had been attended by their fathers and grandfathers. It makes no difference if the new café’s owner is a local resident. For example, in the village of Palasa a local woman, after working in Greece for many years and earning the necessary startup budget, turned her house into a boarding-house, which is highly modernized, up to and including solar batteries. She offers rooms for rent and food all year round (Novik 2017a). A large marketing campaign on the Internet, helped by the children and grandchildren of the village businesswoman, has ensured her boarding-house became a huge success among foreign and Albanian tourists. However, her *kafenio* has not become a meeting place for the residents of Palasa – many of them have not even come for a single visit. Aunt Leta (as she calls herself) had no chances of becoming a gatekeeper – first of all, because she had been absent from the village for many years, so many social connections had been broken, she had missed many events important for the village life, and she did not know all the news, hence her

inability to see all the nuances of the relationships within the village and with the neighboring villages (cf. Scollon 1998; Tannen & Kendall & Gordon 2007). At the same time, Aunt Leta herself blames the Palasiots' narrow-mindedness and unnecessarily extreme adherence to the traditions.

In the same village, there is a hotel likewise called Palasa, built in the 2000s, with a wonderful view of the sea and the mountains, at the side of the road leading from Tirana south to Saranda (Fig. 4). Travelers happily stay there overnight.



Figure 4. Hotel "Palasa." Palasa. June 2015. Photograph by Alexander Novik. Personal archive.

The hotel has an excellent restaurant – both inside and on the terrace, with palms and blossoming oleanders planted around. The business is owned by Mihalis Laluci, and the hotel is currently managed by his son. The establishment had every chance to become a new meeting place to attract the local residents, since Mr. Laluci is one of the most respected villagers – in the period of socialism,

he was chairman of the village cooperative as well as head of the Party cell, which made him one of the government of the entire region of Himara (Novik 2015a; 2019a). With the arrival of democracy, his role in the village was not diminished – he managed to build a hotel with a restaurant in one of the best places, open rooms for rent in his own house etc. With his help, one can solve various questions related to purchasing land in the coastal region, getting a job, getting a lucrative contract (not just in the village), etc. For his compatriots, he has remained a man on whose decision many current issues and even fates of many people in general depend – a shining example of a gatekeeper, for the gatekeeping theory's point of view (Erickson & Shultz 1982; Johnston 2007). Moreover, he views himself as such, even though he is not aware of the foreign term thought up by the linguists and anthropologists. However, in spite of everything, his establishment has not become a meeting place for the villagers – even though the presence of a strong leader is obvious, and the palms can theoretically be taken for the traditional plane trees.

Mr. Laluci himself, who possesses the charisma and consequently the ambitions of a village head, does not wish his establishment to become the main place for making collective decisions and for developing the community strategy. The *kafenio* near the plane tree should remain such a place, the one close to the main village church, “because this is what our ancestors willed for us”.

This is why the new hotel is for the tourists, and the restaurant, in the last few years, has served only the workers who are building a resort center with apartments and villas on the coast. The plane tree, meanwhile, remains the main center of gathering of the locals, being the symbol of the Greeks' identity and the declared autochthony on this territory. “Business is business. And tradition is tradition” (Novik 2019b).

Sacred place = gatekeeping's place?

In Palasa, the main place to announce upcoming events (such as engagements, weddings, funerals or wakes) is still the old café under the plane tree, near the church. It is also used for making the most important decisions concerning community life. In this *kafenio*, the villagers gather on the main and secondary feast days of the calendar year: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, St. Elijah's Day etc. The turbulent events of the twentieth century, accompanied by persecutions

of the Church, led to a considerable reduction of the religious aspect of the Palasiots' life. The Orthodox church, shut down during the years of monism, was restored with the beginning of the democratic transformations in the country in the early 1990s. However, the village still does not have its own priest. A priest living in the town of Himara comes to perform the services on the main feasts, in accordance with his agreement with the villagers. The local residents nostalgically remember the days when members of a priests' dynasty Billa served in the village and one could ask them at any moment, to help or to perform a special service – one of commemoration, of thankfulness etc.

Some of the powers associated with the role of the coordinator of the village's ritual year, belonging almost solely to the priest before the 1960s, have been, by an unspoken agreement, transferred to the worker at the *kafenio*, who, during different periods, performed the functions of the director, the bartender, the waiter and, if necessary, the cook at the same time. There was also a break of the gender stereotypes which used to be exclusively conservative: the customers could now be served by women, who previously were strictly discouraged, if not outright banned, from entering the men's space of spending their free time and making decisions (cf. Corbett 1991; Coltrane 1996; Kaser 2008).

The transfer to a market economy has simplified business in the food establishment system: it no longer depends on centralized import of products (including sugar, coffee, alcohol and other drinks), agreements on hiring the staff, getting the ever-rare building materials for restoration through the clumsy supply system etc. The new owners of the business are able to choose the assortment and the menu by themselves, set the prices, and make decisions on renovations or delay thereof. They have even become able to determine the business's working hours – they no longer need to get the government's permit for that or to conform it to the labor laws. Now the owners' main priority is correspondence to the villagers' needs, which are based on the villagers' agricultural work schedule, established customs, and need for communication.

The *kafenio* under the plane tree in Palasa opens its doors in the morning, around 9:00, and is opened until dinnertime (around 14:00). Then it resumes admitting visitors after 16:00 till early in the evening (18:00). The schedule can be shortened if the owners – an elderly couple – have other business to see to, or it can be extended if the local regulars want to gather and discuss urgent problems or simply wish to meet “at the old place”. For that to happen, one can call the owners on their mobile number, which can be found on the *kafenio*'s door.

Usually the patrons order Turkish coffee, which is called Greek here (the establishment does not even have a coffee machine for preparing espresso, cappuccino or macchiato), homemade *rakia* (usually made from grapes), and soft drinks. Wine or beer are not popular here. As for the snacks, the patrons can order bryndza, bread, olives, vegetable salad, or garden fruits. This completely “non-touristic” kit is the base of an average order at the *kafenio*. Moreover, the visitors can find all these drinks and food at home. Their goal in coming here is to talk and make decisions. If someone needs to hire builders or to find an assistant for the preparation of homemade *rakia* (a fairly difficult process for a single person), to invite people to the harvesting of the crops or to announce an upcoming wedding, “coming under the plane tree” is a necessity and an honorable duty.

By the way, during my own (or with my colleagues) field work in Himara a gathering under the plane tree was a necessary ritual for gathering the data: the owners of the café not only gave me advice on which villagers to invite as experts on the question blocks from the linguistic and ethnological questionnaires, but coordinated such meetings themselves, personally calling or inviting such people (Novik 2015b; 2016b). This way, they both introduced the researchers to the Palasiots, admitting the former to the inner circle (which is exceptionally important in a region with diverse ethnic groups and a ripening conflict situation), and opened the channels for gathering information from the respected and knowledgeable people, the search for whom could have been fruitless without their help.

I can clearly see the gatekeepers’ role that this couple plays in the village community. Within their union, one can also discern the leader. Though the business belongs to the man (approx. 70 years), most of the decisions are made by his wife (approx. 65 years). The husband frequently sits down at the table with the guests and takes part in discussing the latest problems, while the wife is serving drinks, carries the dirty dishes away etc., only fragmentally participating in the conversation. However, she can order her husband to make coffee for one of the guests or to pour the *rakia*, and it is she who takes the payment from the patrons. In this family business, she is the gatekeeper. Likewise, it is she who gives advice on the organization of various events and is responsible for spreading the news (about an announced engagement, the nearest upcoming church service, or the plans on building an old people’s home for Swedish pensioners) (Novik 2017a; 2017b). She is able to spread the information or, on

the contrary, to block the unwelcome recipients from it. As a result, the villagers are interested in keeping up their friendships with her, to make sure they would get cordially invited to a family celebration, would not miss an important service on a church feast day, or would receive a lucrative order at their job.

In the nearby village of Kondraq, the *kafenio* for the inner circle works the same way. The owners – husband and wife – actively participate in the social life of the village, directing the actions of the members of the community via their advice, introduction of potential workers to the necessary people etc. Among the regulars at their establishment, there is the keeper of the keys of the local church (the man who can give comprehensive information on the upcoming service and open the religious building if necessary). At this *kafenio*, they can tell you – or refuse to tell – of the village's history as well as of the lives of its residents.

Discussion

The author has set a goal of analyzing ritual practices among the population of Himara, as illustrated by the meeting for coffee. These practices are viewed as patriarchal and unaffected by major transformations by most of the researchers. Among my study's questions were the following: what influences the preservation of the tradition of meeting under the plane tree; who coordinates ritual events in the absence of church leaders and in the situation of the local and central government's obviously dwindling authority; what causes the transformations in the hierarchy of community opinions and decisions; whose authority it is to admit other members of the community to the inner circle.

The study's results show that, despite the deep changes of the economic and ideological components of the life of Himara's population, the traditional ways and adhering to the ritual practices continue to be characteristic of the region's village community. However, despite the expectations I had before starting the field work, the people who make decisions about the important events and actions – the gatekeepers – are not the most successful, rich, active and well-connected members of society, but those who possess the keys to information and therefore can influence the community opinion. In the localities of Himara I have studied, such gatekeepers are the historical cafés' owners (or, much more rarely, their long-time employees). This is accepted by successful businessmen,

members of the administrations and others who “rule the fates” of their hired workers, staff etc. From this I can conclude that the community needs a legalized broadcaster of news, ideas, traditions, and social acceptance or reproach.

I have not confirmed the widespread opinion of the patriarchal nature of the Himariot society and the exceptional stability of its gender roles. Women, who not only got equal rights with men during the period of socialism but also had to perform many of their functions (such as serving in the army, taking part in reserve training and in “voluntary” building actions etc.), had quickly managed to fill the niche of the directors of village cafés, shops etc., something that used to be the prerogative of men. This way they could transform into gatekeepers in the recent times, the period of privatization and capitalist economy. No attempts of revitalization or museification of the old traditions could push them off this pedestal. Women became the coordinators of the ritual year in the majority of Himara’s villages.

Conclusions

In this study, I have analyzed the transformations of ritual practices among the population of Himara, mainly the Orthodox Greeks, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The sociopolitical upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century, accompanied by persecution of religious institutions and destruction of churches, directed by the government, have brought to life the phenomenon of the place under the plane tree – the sacred locus of the village communities where, all year round, the villagers exchange news, announce important events in family lives, celebrate feasts and make decisions on the collective self-government and the economic activities. The change in ritual practices was heavily influenced by:

- 1) The factor of the sacred locus’s prestige in the mind of the community. The *kafenio* in the center of the village or the quarter, traditionally situated next to the church, automatically transferred many of the religious establishment’s functions to itself during the period of the militant atheism: in the *kafenio*, the locals began to announce engagements, weddings, wakes etc. Furthermore, in the difficult situation of ethnic tension (which often leads to conflicts, sometimes causing fatalities), the plane tree, which, according to the tradition, is planted in the main square, serves as a bright marker and symbol of Greek identity;

2) The mechanism of the revitalization of tradition, which is used in case of artificial intrusion in the people's ritual sphere. The Albanian government's attempts to close the churches, cancel the religious feasts, expropriate private property, and introduce their ideological foundation led to a fiasco after half a century of experimenting – the local communities continued, for example, to consider an engagement official only if it was announced under the plane tree;

3) The conscious or unconscious wish by various communities to museify their past, in spite of the challenges of the present. Thus, the cardinal change of the paradigm of the political, economic, social, religious, and cultural customs of the population of Himara over the course of two generations has not led to a cancellation of the value of the traditional, as one could expect according to the data from other regions of Albania, mainly the urban areas. The Himariots have remained dedicated to upholding the locally established customs and traditions and attempt to preserve – museify, to use the anthropological term – the heritage of their ancestors.

Notes

¹ See more: Bartl 1995; Smirnova 2003; Billa 2020.

² The use of the term “gatekeeping” within academic research has a literary antecedent in a 1914 short story by Franz Kafka, original in German “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”). In the story, Kafka (1993 [1914]) exaggerates the literal images evoked by the gatekeeping metaphor to create a parable about social relationships and individual experience (see: Johnston 2007: 166).

³ Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) was the first communist chief of the state of Albania.

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Alexander Novik, PhD, is the Head of the Department of European Studies, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences; Prof. Ass. in Albanian Philology and Balkan Ethnology at the Department of General Linguistics, Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia. His research interests are in the field of traditional and modern culture, ethnolinguistics, ethnic and religious minorities, folk costume, and festivity.

njual@mail.ru, novik.petersburg@gmail.com