

GJIROKASTRA FOLKLORE FESTIVAL AS THE MAIN RITUAL EVENT IN ALBANIAN CULTURAL LIFE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Alexander Novik

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

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

Abstract: The paper presents an overview and analysis of the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival (NFFoGj), one of the most important events in the cultural life of Albania. Global transformations that have affected all aspects of life have inevitably brought changes to traditional culture, traditional values and relations with the outside world, including across the Balkans. The majority of program issues were inspired by a common European practice of holding mass folklore events and measures aimed at nurturing and preserving cultural heritage. It is deeply connected to the process of revitalisation of old ritual practices and folk costume and to the socialisation of people who have professional and semi-professional associations with ethnic culture. Having analysed the materials collected in the run-up to the festival and during the event as well as during field studies in the Western Balkans in 1992–2019, I can acknowledge revitalisation of many, if not all, elements of folk culture. In this case revitalisation does not mean following the tradition literally, but rather an attempt to preserve it while adopting a modern perspective and advances in technology. The essential part of this process is the attempt to breathe new life into the components of traditional culture, and adapt them to the here and now. The NFFoGj has also become

a major attempt to museficate the cultural heritage of the Albanians. Contests that have been held regularly over the past 70 years to reveal the best examples of folk art and support independent artists have encouraged interest in the roots of national culture and helped many generations not to forget what their predecessors valued. Thus, folk dance, music, songs and costume were reproduced – at times artificially – in various regions of the country to showcase the achievements of a locality (village, district, town, region) at the national festival as the main ritual cultural event.

Keywords: folklore festival, cultural life, Albanians, ritual event, revitalisation, museification, folklorisation, heritage

Introduction

The 21st century is marked by innovative processes in the sphere of economics, social relations, traditional culture, etc. in the Western Balkans. We can observe huge transformations of ritual code and popular clothes throughout the recent decades (Shkurti et al. 2004; Ceribašić 2005: 9–38; Stublla 2007; Abazi & Doja 2016: 163–178).

The majority of phenomena which have gained importance in every Balkan country in recent years was inspired by a common European practice of holding mass folklore events and measures aimed at nurturing and preserving cultural heritage. Global transformations that have affected all aspects of life have inevitably brought changes to traditional culture, traditional values and relations with the outside world (compare: Oinas 1979; Sedakova 2008: 44–55). The initiative to preserve cultural heritage by holding mass events and commissioning singers, musicians, dancers, makers of traditional clothes etc. originated in Germany, Switzerland, France, Sweden, former Yugoslavia and other countries after WWII, when economic recovery and industrial growth helped to secure welfare for the people (Forry 1986; Bauman 1992; Ronström 2001: 49–64; Ceribašić 2009: 241–266). In that particular economic and social setting, making ends meet was no longer the only concern, so people could afford to give some of their attention to reviving cultural life, which had been reduced or even disappearing rapidly in the turbulent war years of the first half of the 20th century. Considerable funding was poured into revitalising folk culture with modern information channels employed and plans set out to involve more and more individuals, governmental institutions and private funds in the events (Kapchan & Strong 1999: 239–253; Zebec 2002: 93–110).

One of the most important events in the cultural life of Albania is the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival, which has been organized once every five years (the last one was held in 2015). It is deeply connected to the process of revitalisation of old ritual practices and folk costume and to the socialisation of people who have professional and semi-professional associations with ethnic culture. It is very popular in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The festival of Gjirokastra is a feast of song, dance, traditional clothes and performance. We can currently distinguish several different motivations and versions of this event in the 20th and 21st centuries: from the honouring of the best singers, dancers, folklore groups and costume complexes by a professional jury to simply presenting gifts to the eldest artist in the village or in the country (Novik 2016: 280–283; Festivali Folklorik 2020). However, in all cases the tradition of ritually venerating traditions remains central.

This study is based on the field work I carried out in the Western Balkans in 1992–2019, 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. The source for this paper were items of traditional culture (mostly clothing, footwear, musical instruments, sheet music) which are displayed or deposited in collections of National Museum (Tirana), Historical Museum (Shkodra), Ethnological Museum (Prishtina) and others (Novik 2015a; Novik 2015b). While researching the topic, I studied the works of Albanian scholars who have been looking at music and dance culture of Albanians, their traditional costume, festive and carnival culture, rites and ritual practices. I also made use of the theoretical works of cultural and social anthropologists who have explored Italian, German, Croatian, Greek, Bulgarian, Macedonian and other folklore festivals (Bauman 1992; Hadžihusejnović-Valašek 2008: 177–196; Anastasova 2011: 159–169).

The main methodological principles underlying the study are descriptive, typological and comparative approaches. Looking at the folklore festival as a ritual event in a particular socio-historical setting in the Western Balkans I treated the collective actions of actors involved in the festival (performers, judges, guests and residents of Gjirokastra) as a single text with its own distinct structure and a complex system, where each element carries a certain function.

The principal methods employed were structural and functional analysis. A historical approach allowed me to reveal the main strands of the genesis of the festival and the evolution of folk costume.

Historical Overview

The Gjirokastra Folklore Festival was set up by the socialist government of Albania in the first years following WWII as a display of amateur folklore ensembles and individual performers in folk genres. It was aimed to showcase achievements in preserving the musical, dance, song and artistic heritage of Albanians. Later, the festival started featuring ensembles and individual acts representing ethnic minorities, largely Greek and Slavic.

The first national festivals took place in 1946, 1949, 1952, 1957 and 1959 in Tirana, the capital of Albania. In 1959 Tirana hosted the National Festival of Song, Music and Dance, where a total of 400 of prizes and awards were given for performing arts, best dance etc. This was followed by a festival in Elbasan in 1966 and in Lezha in 1967. The First Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival took place on 8–16 October 1968 and featured amateur performers from all the regions of Albania.

It was then decided to hold the event every five years. Thus, subsequent festivals were organised in 1973, 1978, 1983, 1988, the latter event marking the end of the socialist era festivals. Every next event exceeded the previous one in number of participants, nominations, media coverage etc. Thus, in 1973, 1370 performers made into the finals, while in 1978 53 000 artists auditioned, out of which 1560 made it to the stage of Gjirokastra (Festivali Folklorik 2020).

There was one occasion, though, when the festival was relocated to the town of Berat, the second urban centre of Albania, renowned for its traditional architecture and historic monuments and included on the UNESCO World Heritage List (alongside Gjirokastra) (Gjirokastra was inscribed in 2005, Berat in 2008). This was in 1995, after the fall of monism in the country (the period of communist rule (1944–1991), most of which took place during the years of the leadership of Enver Hoxha (1908–1985)). The change in the date of the festival (1995 instead of the 1993 as originally scheduled) was also partly because of revolutionary transformations in the country. However, in the following years, at the request of the majority of participants and organisers, the festival was returned to the original site, which was associated with its best moments, keeping the festival in Gjirokastrain all future iterations (Fig. 1).

Yet, despite the agreements, ideology interfered again with folk art. For example, the festival in 2008 was rescheduled to 2009 so that it would not coincide with the 100th anniversary of Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator

born in Gjirokastra. The last festival which took place in 2015 had also been rescheduled twice, first for fear of it coinciding with one of the dates associated with the former dictator, and then from autumn to spring simply because of better weather conditions. In 2020, the festival was supposed to take place in May. However, it has been rescheduled to autumn 2020 due to the devastating 6.4-magnitude earthquake that jolted Albania in November 2019 and the subsequent outbreak of COVID-19.



Figure 1. The participants of the festival. Gjirokastra. May 2015. Photograph by the author.

Details on Festival Organisation

According to the rules, in order to get a chance to perform on stage in front of thousands of people, artists (singers, dancers, musicians etc.) have to audition on a local level. The local jury includes leaders of amateur folklore ensembles, directors of cultural venues, university and art school professors, professional performers.

Members of the national jury visit the regions from the capital. They try to judge provincial artists objectively. Such double or often triple selection is meant to help the organisers pick the best of the best. Then the contestants are to perform on stage in Gjirokastra (Fig. 2). The best in their nominations make it to the finals. In order to win, apart from excellent vocal, music, dancing and artistic skills, the artist or the ensemble must demonstrate an original costume from the region of the performed a song or musical piece. At the final stage of the event the jury grants awards and prizes. Thus, the occasion involves thousands of people.



Figure 2. The performance of a folk group on the stage of the old castle. Gjirokastra. May 2015. Photograph by the author.

The run-up to the festival starts well in advance, normally it takes up all 5 years or more in between the occasions. This makes it the most significant and costly event within the ritual cycle of folklore celebrations in Albania. To perform on stage in Gjirokastra means to receive acclaim nationwide. During the festival and in the run-up to it, the artists are filmed by local and national television, the event gets coverage in the media including that of neighbouring countries where Albanians live.

In the recent years the festival has been frequented by the Albanian diaspora, who see their participation in the occasion as a matter of great prestige and importance. This means the geography of the festival continuously spreads to new countries, not only the Balkan ones, historically inhabited by Albanians, but also countries of recent migration (Germany, Switzerland, USA and others) (Novik 2015a: 10–12; Novik 2015b).

Before and Now: Accounts of the Participants

In the years before the democratic transition had taken off (since the early 1990s), the real, not simply declared, state patronage meant approval and concern for the preservation of folk art. Clearly, such approach correlated with ideological confrontation with the “enemies”: the West and the bourgeois views and values it represented, and the East with its reformed communist views (mostly former USSR and PRC) and so on, where there was “not the folk art” (and hence “harmful” art) that flourished (Mustaqi 1979; Haxhihasani 1985: 75–88).

Such intervention on part of the government was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it led to an unreasonable amount of ideology and politics around the festival (Panajoti & Kruta 1985: 89–108; Uçi 1985: 3–18), but on the other, the state supported folklore ensembles all over the country, including little villages in mountain regions; such financial backing secured a steady development of amateur ensembles, succession in arts and crafts and helped to keep traditional costume alive.

Current performers and guests are nostalgic about what the contest used to be like in the days of monism:

The government used to pay for everything. We arrived in groups, they would provide accommodation, feed and entertain us, we sang all through the festival: at morning rehearsals, on stage during the day and then continue till early morning with other participants. And now what? You arrive here on the day of your performance, come on stage in the evening and head home. No funds, they say. And where is that money gone? (Interlocuter – an Albanian man from Fier, 65, recorded in May 2015).

Such accounts are not only given by regular participants, but also by members of the jury coming from all Albanian-speaking parts of the Western Balkans who decided the artistic future of the performers.

We used to hang out 24 hours with the performers. Everybody was having such a great time. We looked forward to the event for 5 years and when we finally got together, we would sing all night long! Those were the days! (Interlocuter – an Albanian woman from Tirana, 65, member of the jury since 1968, recorded in May 2015).

Some criticism, however, can at times be totally unjustified:

What are these judges doing there? They are not even professional. [In 2015, the jury included the artistic director of the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet of Albania, a ballet dancer himself; a composer and professor of Music; an ethnographer specialising in traditional costume, a former director of the abovementioned institute etc. – A.N.]. What do they understand? These auditions should be judged by people like us, directors of clubs. It's us who the festival depends on. (Interlocuter – an Albanian woman from Shkodra, 54, recorded in May 2015).

Yet, despite certain criticism and nostalgia about the good old days when “everything was better”, including folklore festivals, almost all of the informants (over 100) see the festival as a major historic event for the country and all Balkan Albanians.

Gjirokastra as a Sacred Locus

According to oral history, the town dates back to antiquity. The locals will readily tell numerous legends, including the one about Princess Argjiro upon which a number of poetic and literary pieces are based. Archeological finds point to Bronze Age and Iron Age dwellings on the site. The foundation stones of the town citadel date back to the 3rd century AD (Riza 2004: 5–20). Historic records suggest that the town was originally populated by a Greek-speaking tribe of the Chaonians, which belonged to the Epirote group. Later, Gjirokastra and the surrounding areas became home to Albanians, Aromanians and Turks (Censuri i popullsisë dhe banesave 2011; Gjirokastra, Albania 2020).

Gjirokastra appears first in the historical record in the 14th century as Αργυρόκαστρο (Argyrokastro) – a city under Byzantine rule (Kiel 2010: 138). After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, it was then incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, ultimately becoming a part of the new independent Albania. During WWII Royal Greece, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany successively established administrative rule in the town. In 1944, Gjirokastra was liberated by Albanian partisan bands and a severe totalitarian regime was subsequently established for decades. With the democratic transformations of 1991, the previously imposed rules and regulations concerning city development were overthrown. Gjirokastra, now on the UNESCO list, could pursue an autonomous policy in cultural development and supporting ethnic minorities (above all – Greek) (UNESCO: World Heritage List; Novik 2015a).

Throughout its history Gjirokastra has been of special importance to Albania. Firstly, it was a guarded outpost in the south: the town marked the border between the Albanian and the Greek ethnic areas (being itself a cultural mix). Secondly, the ruling elite aimed to gain presence in the south of the Albanian area, which the neighbours had claims to, by erecting strong fortifications with the Castle of Gjirokastra serving as a certain symbol of military power. Furthermore, in the 20th century, the town became a birthplace to a number of prominent figures who influenced history, science, education and culture of the country and brought fame to Albania abroad (which is essential for Albanian mindset and attitude to the outside world) (Gjirokastra 2020). To name a few, these are communist leader Enver Hoxha (1908–1985), etymologist Eqrem Çabej (1908–1980) and writer Ismail Kadare (born 1936). Finally, the Festival

of Gjirokastra became a recognised brand and an organic part of the cultural life of Albanians, its ritual cycle.

The fact that the event takes place in the town of Gjirokastra, hailed by poets and writers and home to key events shaping Albanian history, only adds sacredness to what is happening on stage in the ancient castle.

We are really excited to perform in Gjirokastra. The town is so much associated with the history of this country. You've heard of Ali Pasha of Tepelena¹, haven't you? He personally took part in rebuilding the castle back in the 18th century to hold back the enemies. And now we walk on the stones that were brought here on this slope by his order. (Interlocutor – an Albanian man from Pogradec, 53, recorded in 2004).

Many participants talk about time connection between the past and the present, they appreciate such a touch of history.

Have you heard that legend? Well, actually not a legend, in fact, a real story. There was a time when many people would stand against the Turks. Some were just road bandits. So, one day the soldiers caught one of these robbers who was plotting something against the Turks. There was a brief trial as ordered from Istanbul after which he was beheaded in the castle. The head rolled across the square and, after it hit the stones, one eye leaked out. Under the Ottoman rules that head was supposed to be delivered to the capital so that the bosses could make sure the perpetrator had been executed and display their head in public. That's what the rules were. They sent a messenger with this head to Istanbul. He was to cool it down with ice and change bandages all the way to stop it from rotting. Mind you, it was a long way, not like now by plane! So, this messenger brought the head to Istanbul and when the bosses saw an eye was missing they decided that he hadn't taken proper care of it along the way. They were thinking of executing him too, but then a message came from Gjirokastra confirming that the head had been damaged during the execution and they let the soldier go. Those were the days!

You think that was long ago, in the times of some legendary sultans? Well, no. That was the early 20th century. There are still some people around who were kids then.



Figure 3. The Ethnographic Museum. Gjirokastra. August 2018. Photograph by the author.

History is all around. You walk here in the castle in your grandfather's costume and remember it wasn't long ago that heads rolled on these stones.
(Interlocutor – a Greek man from Dropull, 68, recorded in 1992).

It is not quite clear from this interview whether this is a memorate received through an urban legend or a story from a fiction book. Thus, Ismail Kadare describes this story from a century ago in his novel “Chronicle in Stone” (1971) (original name in Albanian “*Kronikë në gur*”). However, the writer says that this real story was passed on by word of mouth when he was growing up in the 1940s and it linked the modern history of the town with its Ottoman past (Kadare 2000).

The sacredness of the locus is enhanced by memorial places. That is not only the ancient castle with its bastions, but also distinct neighbourhoods (*Palorto, Pllaka, Manalat, Teqe, Dunavat, Varrosh, Cfaka* etc.), historic mansions with individual names that once belonged to city nobles (*Banesa e Zekatëve, Banesa Babameto, Shtëpia e Fane Roshit, Shtëpia e Gjulzidanit* etc.), an ancient bridge, taverns and coffeehouses (*Hani i Hadërenje, Hani i Kashaut, Kafene e Adem*

Beut, Kafene e Bame Shtrigut, Kafene e Karagjozate etc.), monuments (including one to two young maids who were hanged by occupants for taking part in the partisan movement), city cemeteries (Riza 2004; Riza 2011: 30–36; Hysa 2012: 305–310; Novik 2015a; Gjirokastra 2020). Of special importance among the sacred loci is the mansion where the future dictator Enver Hoxha was born over a century ago as well as the house which was the birthplace of Ismail Kadare (Velaj 2000: 19). The Hoxha House extended and rebuilt in socialist times has been turned nowadays into an ethnographic museum housing an excellent collection of items of traditional culture of the town dwellers (Fig. 3). The Kadare house was bought by a French admirer of the writer's talent and converted into a literary museum with a wealth of photo exhibits. Alongside the participants of the festival, the museums attract all Albanians living in Albania, the Balkans, as well as the diaspora and foreign guests who happen to visit Gjirokastra.

Our town is built completely of natural stone. We are a citadel of tradition. Damaging a stone, a sacred stone, a sacred mountain is a bigger crime than doing harm to a man. It's even worse that murder! Everyone here knows this. When monism came to an end we all knew where our borders were. Because we remembered that this piece of land before that stone belonged to my father and grandfather and that piece of land beyond that stone to the father of that man. We quickly and smoothly reclaimed our property. No conflicts, everybody knew where their stones were. (Interlocutor – an Albanian man from Gjirokastra district, 64, recorded in 1996).

Gjirokastra got its cult status largely due to the festival, which made it a pilgrimage place for admirers of folk music, dance, traditional costume and folk culture. The town became a stage for a ritual involving thousands of people. All interlocutors share the opinion that there is no other event on the Balkan peninsula which could match that scale.

Rural vs Urban and the Question of Preserving Folk Culture

The history of the 20th century suggests that the city (urban culture, urban stereotypes, urban standards of comfort and urban mentality) have gradually come to dominate most European and non-European countries with the traditional rural life (rural culture etc.) giving way, a process driven by rules of prestige.

Albania saw several formational changes within one century: it was a right-less outskirts of the Ottoman Empire with almost feudal ways, after that, an independent republic under the rule of the red bishop Fan Stilian Noli (1882–1965), then a monarchy naively relying on the capital of Italian oligarchs, then an occupation zone of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, then the domain of the communists who tried to build a classless society with the help of successively the USSR and the PRC or independently and finally a new democracy with a liberal economy determined to join the EU and other international organizations and institutions. Amidst the social and economic transformations the urban slowly but steadily superseded the rural. This could not be held back by the governments declaring the need to support villages and respect the labour and values of the peasants. The city advanced firmly bringing its achievements, manners and lifestyle.

For a long time the majority of Albanians lived in rural areas. Thus, according to INSTAT, up to 80% of Albanians lived in villages until the late 1980s – the time when democratic reforms took off (INSTAT 2020). After the fall of the totalitarian monist regime people were allowed to dwell where they wanted, not where were obliged to by law, so a considerable number of Albanians moved to big cities (mostly Tirana, Durrës, Shkodra) in search of work and better life. Others chose to go abroad (mostly to EU countries) and this migration continues to this day. The early 1990s marked breaking away from traditional life. At the same time nowadays only 53.4% of Albanians live in cities and towns (Demographics of Albania 2020).

Active state support helped to keep amateur folklore ensembles at a high level. They toured all over the country and consolidated thousands of people who loved folk music, songs, dance and culture. City dwellers were getting involved in the culture which was perceived as essentially rural, but which was still shared by all the nation, as in an agrarian state there was hardly anyone who had completely cut ties with the country. In fact, during the socialist years it was common for the government to send people from urban areas, i.e. school and university students, white collars etc., to the country to work in farming.

The song culture in cities was essentially rural (Dibra 2009a: 219–222; compare: Ceribašić 2003). Whether at celebrations and family gatherings or simply when getting together at home or in a café, people would often sing, solo or together. This is particularly common for weddings and other family celebrations. Without doubt, the actual wedding is a full-blown display and

contest of ritual songs, dance and oratory. In all cases, the rural is seen as traditional, genuine and true.

Dance is part and parcel of festival and carnival culture. Albania is a perfect example of extreme preservation (at times even conservation) and development of folk dance, which is typical for most Balkan countries (Ruka 2015). Any rural celebration, be it wedding (all confessions), circumcision (Muslims), baptism (Christians), engagement (all confessions), cannot happen without *valle* – a collective dance.

Folk Costume

Traditional clothing merits special attention in this study as it is often the most distinct marker of the regional identity of the participants and guests of the festival. This is why the majority of those taking part in the festival in Gjirokastra prefer to wear traditional clothes of their region not only for their performances on stage as part of the contest, but also while they are in town walking the streets, visiting fairs, having a meal in a café or restaurant.

Over 300 variants of traditional costume can be found in Albania, which may be grouped into 6 (or 5) main female and 5 male types (Gjergji 1988: 124–125, 145–146). Every region or often even every village has its own local kind of clothing with some settlements having several of them. During the years of the Festival the majority of local costume variants were presented in one form or another at the contest. Their authenticity, which is declared by the bearers of cultural tradition, needs to be discussed.

The issues related to folk costume require serious analysis. Let us consider clothing made of gorse (*Spartium junceum* L.) as a case in point. Thus, according to Andromaqi Gjergji, an Albanian ethnographer, and other scholars, in South Albania, in the village of Radhima (region of Vlora), textile was produced from gorse until the 1970s (Gjergji 1988). Members of amateur ensembles from the region insist on wearing clothes with marked elements made of gorse, as it was done in the old days. If an artistic family still has the costumes passed on from grandparents, they use them, and this is a matter of special pride for the delegates to the festival (Novik 2015a: 16–17). Those who don't own the right costumes try to sew them according to vintage patterns, photos, drawings, patterns or memories of old-timers using modern fabric, threads, gimps etc. for factory production. In this case we are not dealing with preserving the

tradition of clothes-making; rather it should be described as revitalisation of such a notion as folk costume. For instance, costumes from Vlora region were never decorated with beads and glitter: instead, the traditional costume featured *gajtan* ('gimp'). However, should the artists desire, craftsmen will decorate their costumes with beads and glitter, so that they could look catchier on stage. Thus, innovation interferes with tradition and after many years could well be perceived as tradition or even an archaic feature (!). A wealth of similar examples can be found all across the Balkans, not only during the festival in Gjirokastra. Going back to the use of gorse in the costumes from Vlora region, it must be mentioned that the technology of processing the plant is also being revived in order to revitalise the local variant of traditional costume.

The other side of preserving the ritual markedness of local types and variants of costume at the Festival of Gjirokastra is the maximal use of all sets of vintage clothes that are available to this day. Not in the least this is due to a pragmatic factor – a special prize for the “Costume” nomination and the general awareness of the fact that the judge responsible for costume has one of the leading voices in the jury (Festivali Folklorik 2020).

The easiest way to present the costume of your region is to use your grandmother's outfits and this is in fact what some regions do. In Myzeqe, Dropull, Shkodra, a significant amount of vintage clothes can be found in people's homes, where it is kept for festivals and ritual events. In some regions traditional clothes still serves as casual wear. For example, the women of Zadrima², Malësia e Madhe and other regions wear folk clothes to the village bazaar or travelling to the nearby town (Shkurti et al. 2004). It is either self-made or purchased from local craftswomen who use vintage patterns. A different situation can be found in the regions, such as Korça, Himara, the villages of Bosnians in Middle Albania and others, where technology and traditions of making and wearing historic clothing had been lost by the early 21st century. In this case every costume complex that can be found in a village or town becomes scarce and therefore particularly valued by the locals. Such a model costume can be borrowed by amateur artists or common villagers only in exceptional cases such as wedding or the actual Festival of Gjirokastra which is seen as the main national ritual event. These facts support the theory of museification of folk culture in modern conditions (look: Mrvaljević 2006: 6–10). What used to be perceived as casual and trivial receives the status of special and invaluable – on par with a museum item.



Figure 4. The participants of the festival.
Gjirokastra. May 2015. Photograph by the author.

Such a transformation of traditional costume into a museum item and even acquiring a sacred quality has been happening in Albania in the last 30 years (according to my field studies). This process takes various forms depending on how important folk clothes is to a particular region of the country (Fig. 4). Thus, in the abovementioned Zadrime region (quite backward economically, I must say) traditional costume is still relevant as everyday wear and here

we document artificial folklorisation of a natural reproduction of clothes. Conversely, in the *qark* ('county') of Tirana, the capital region, there is hardly any trace of folk clothing left. Hence, artists have to sew it or purchase it from tailors specialising in such trade. As a rule (and this is the case in most world capitals), the local council has enough funds to provide their performers with quality costumes and decent stage prop for the festival. This helps to nurture and develop arts and crafts involved in the making traditional clothes. It is not infrequent that driven by a sense of responsibility before clients, tailors and embroiderers use models housed in ethnographic, history and local history museums in addition to specimens from grandmothers' trunks typical for the region. These tend to be the best costume complexes made by the best masters of the time and having the most striking decorations and a compulsory set of symbols essential for folk culture. That gives us an observation of how specific variants of folk costume are being museified.

Nowadays the Festival of Gjirokastra serves the main catalyst for the state of Albanian folk costume. What the organisers of the contest, the jury and numerous media expect from the participants is not the real state of things, but rather a dressed up version involving a diverse range of local costume types, albeit largely made up or reinvented, but striking and making you believe in the myth of preserving traditions. One way or another, the folk costume at the festival is ritual clothes and it gives guaranteed access to collective ritual action.

The Festival as a Ritual Event

The ritual character of the festival has always been and still is determined not only by tradition and fairly archaic nature of Albanian society, but also by political agenda and ideological frames of the state. In the years of monism, the underlying ideology was that the festival should promote folk art as opposition to old bourgeois (inside the country) and new capitalist (abroad) ways (Mustaqi 1979; Panajoti & Kruta 1985: 89–108; Uçi 1985: 3–18). Performances of folk music, song and dance delivered by amateur artists were to replace collective ritual events that had been around for hundreds of years and had represented the spiritual culture of different regions of Albania: mummer carnivals, Orthodox and Catholic cross processions for Christmas and Easter, Muslim and Christian pilgrimage, pagan sacrifices on worship sites in mixed cults and other events pertaining to realm of the sacred (Fig. 5). During the political and social

transformations of the 1990s, the festival was meant to demonstrate the nation's departure from the communist dogma and a new perspective to art (Dizdari 2000; Dibra 2009b: 195–202; Ruka 2015; Abazi & Doja 2016: 163–178). The media positioned the festival not only as the most important cultural event of the country, but also as a major and compulsory ritual, the most traditional and beloved by the nation.

For the days of the festival (in 2015, for example, it lasted 7 days and 7 nights) Gjirokastra turns into one theatre stage, which lends it similarity with European

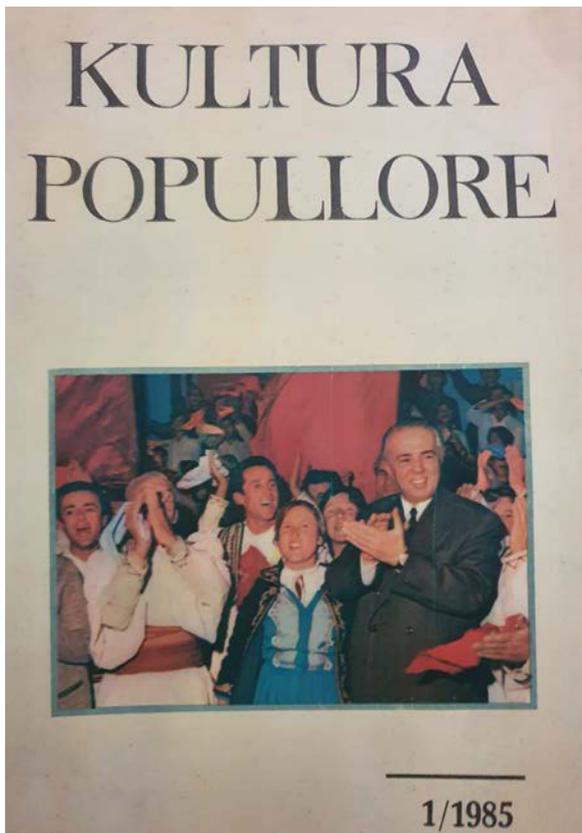


Figure 5. Enver Hoxha with a folk group. Magazine cover. *Kultura Popullore* (Folk culture), 1985, No. 1.

and South American cities that are home to carnivals. The festival remains a free manifestation of exploring the roots of one's ethnic culture and sticking to traditions unaffected by time and short-lived ideological agenda despite multiple attempts to use the event as a tribune for the authorities. Amateur artists, the jury, guests of the festival and local residents take part in the collective ritual which is not limited to the actual performances in the castle, but extends ritual space into the cozy streets of the old town, cafes, restaurants, town parks and recreational areas. Impromptu performances take place right in the streets with sounds of music competition heard from all places until early morning (Kasoruhu & Tole 2004; Novik 2015b: 10–12).

What most participants value the above all is this laid-back festive atmosphere. Sitting till dawn in a cozy restaurant after another contest day, bumping into rival performers and accepting a music or dancing challenge right in the middle of the street, willing to outshine everyone with an outfit retrieved from grandmother's trunk or tailor-made according some vintage patterns – these things are not just common practice, but also mark the event as a ritual one.

The Festival of Gjirokastra both marks and symbolizes the Albanian cultural code (Xhagolli 2009: 209–217). The ritual period which lasts from one festival to another is not one year, but five years (rarely more or less). However, it is the role of the event that is more important than time span – its participants often refer to time in terms of festival years instead of calendar years, “This was in year of Festival of Gjirokastra 1988” and so on (Novik 2015a: 21). Not infrequently, political and other events are overshadowed by something spectacular witnessed at the festival.

The ritual meaning of the Festival of Gjirokastra is evident: as a cheesy journalist cliché goes, artists “make a symbolic sacrifice to folk art” on the stage of the ancient castle. The audience gathers to appreciate the mastery of the performers, whereas the jury, who judge these skills, act as mere arbitrators who acknowledge the succession of tradition.

Conclusions

The Gjirokastra Folklore Festival is the biggest display of performers and amateur folklore ensembles which support and promote the preservation of traditional dance, music, song and costume in Albania and the Western Balkans. In 2004 and 2015, the number of participants (both main contestants and

supporting acts) reached 15 000. This has allowed the organisers to position it as the biggest (and hence the most important from their point of view) folklore event not only on the Balkan Peninsula, but in Europe.

The Festival of Gjirokastra is justly considered to be one of the oldest folklore festivals in Europe – that is if we include the post-war years from 1946 to 1968 when it got its current name and status. Traditional dance, music, song and costume are extremely relevant in the modern globalised society (see: Franklin 2001: 211–232).

The event was seen by Albanian leaders as an ideological tool aiming to serve domestic and foreign policy. A folklore festival was bound to get an ideological stamp as it was essentially created to position and promote the Albanian cultural code: Albanian values, achievements, way of thinking and aspirations (look: Xhagolli 2009: 209–217; Doja 2015: 44–75). That is why the involvement of the state has always been significant. In the first post-war decades, the communist leaders of the country were trying to give the appearance of backing traditional values specific to the Albanian society, which remained largely archaic and driven by ancient stereotypes and judgments. The Folklore Festival created the impression of preserving obvious values and achievements (and in many respects actually did that) of the multi-century-old Albanian culture, which people did not want to lose under any circumstances. The democratic transformations of the early 1990s completely shifted the political focus and orientation of the festival. The celebration of folk dance and music got to be used to promote pan-Albanian ideas of gathering and uniting lands historically populated by Albanians.

The Gjirokastra Folklore Festival remains the biggest celebration and manifestation of Albanian cultural heritage. Till this day songs, music and dance are an essential part of weddings, family celebrations and festive culture. While folk roots are being retained, all these arts are undergoing inevitable historic transformations: music gets new arrangements, dance incorporates new elements, song lyrics are alternated and costume is reinterpreted in terms of both elements and cut (optional) and fabric (almost certain with the development in technology).

Having analysed the materials collected in the run-up to the festival and during the event as well as during field studies in the Western Balkans in 1992–2019, I can acknowledge revitalisation of many, if not all, elements of folk culture. In this case revitalisation does not mean following the tradition

literally, but rather an attempt to preserve it while adopting a modern perspective and advances in technology.

The Gjirokastra Folklore Festival has also become a major attempt to museify the cultural heritage of the Albanian nation. Contests that have been held regularly over the past 70 years to reveal the best examples of folk art and support independent artists have encouraged interest in the roots of national culture and helped many generations not to forget what their predecessors valued. Thus, folk dance, music, songs and costume were reproduced – at times artificially – in various regions of the country to showcase the achievements of a locality (village, district, town, region) at the national festival. Since the main motto of the festival was preserving authentic features of Albanian culture (this is what the main prizes and awards were given for, bringing fame and recognition on a national level), the participants tried to copy precisely all the elements of traditional dances, songs music and local varieties of costume. In the natural course of things, the forms and elements of folk art would have definitely evolved in line with time, social and technological changes (compare: Lundberg et al. 2003). However, the artificial nurturing approach to everything that has to do with folk culture has led to the museification of its forms and elements, whereby they were fixed at a certain point in the records of collectors, amateurs and people of that culture. Such mummification, if you will, in balm prepared according to modern recipes has helped to carry over to these days a considerable part of folk culture, i.e. dance, music, songs, and local varieties of costume from most regions of Albania and the neighbouring countries.

For many generations of Albanians the event is an undisputed symbol of Albanian consolidation and the unity of Albanian ethnic culture. At the same time, the festival is promoted as an important social manifestation, which aims to affect the domestic and geopolitical situation thus increasing Albanian presence in the region.

Notes

1 Ali Pasha of Ioannina/Yannina/Janina or of Tepelena, or the Lion of Yannina (1740 – 24 January 1822) was an Ottoman Albanian ruler who served as pasha of a large part of western Rumelia, Ottoman Empire. He fought for independence from Istanbul (Elsie 2004: 40).

2 In 2015, by the way, in the “Costume” nomination at the festival, amateur artists from Zadrimea received a prize. They most often receive this award. Analysing this fact, I can argue that an important factor here is the preservation of traditional clothing in this area in everyday life.

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Alexander Novik, PhD, 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.