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Introduction

A NEW FOUNDATION FOR THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ALBANIA

Gilles de Rapper

Translated from the French by John Angell

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I INTRODUCTION

A New Foundation for the Anthropology of Albania

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Translated from the French by John Angell

The purpose of this special issue of *Ethnologie française* is to survey recent trends in anthropological scholarship about Albania. Despite similarities between how the discipline developed in Albania and other Eastern European countries—i.e., close links between nation- and state- building, a more recent transition from “folklore” to “cultural and social anthropology”—specific factors in the past decade have fueled a promising effervescence in Albanian anthropology. This renewed dynamism has in turn generated a wide range of new research topics, methodological orientations, and theoretical frameworks. This issue is above all intended to give voice to this significant epistemological transition.

The goal is not to present Albania as local anthropologists see it, however, although they are well represented in this issue. Albania is a country, let it be said, that is well known for being unknown, and there is a genuine risk of claiming to reveal its “true image” as compared to common stereotypes. What unites the articles in this issue is less the “realities” that they may reveal than new ways of ethnologically exploring and knowing Albania.

Because this fresh anthropological gaze is the result of interactions between local and foreign anthropologists, these articles reflect a diversity of approaches and voices from the field. Some contributors who can be described “local anthropologists” were educated in Albania. Others are from Albania but were educated abroad and have either continued to work outside the country or have returned. Still others, whose field is Albania but who are originally from and were trained elsewhere, can be thought of as “foreign anthropologists,” regardless of their attachment to the Albania or their integration into Albanian academic circles or society. This intersection between these outsider and insider viewpoints in this issue mirrors the epistemological transformation that these researchers are undertaking.

The task remains of defining the precise nature of this renewal and its implications for the field of anthropology. Anthropology (or ethnography as it was known at the time) became fully institutionalized only after the communists rose to power in Albania after World War Two. At the time, the discipline was unambiguously an instrument of the Party (after 1948, the Albanian Labor Party or ALP,) with a mission of supporting official efforts to control Albanian society. Ethnologists were called upon to legitimize the historical national model promoted by the authorities (which supported the continuity between the Illyrians and present-day Albanians, among other tenets) while also shaping “popular culture” in ways that conformed to prevailing norms (for example, by organizing festivals to display the “new folklore” that glorified the Party). This mission, which was accompanied by generous financial support for ethnological scholarship, translated into genuine progress as new scholars were trained, data collection campaigns were organized, and publications proliferated, including two specialized journals: *Etnografia shqiptare* (Ethnographie albanaise) in 1962 and *Kultura popullore* (Culture populaire) in 1980.

Map1 – Main sites surveyed in this issue



As a consequence, the communist-era legacy of published research studies and archival material is prodigious. After the Party lost power in 1991, however, Albanian anthropology found itself isolated from contemporary thought and unable to keep pace with the profound transformations taking place in Albanian society. The few foreign anthropologists working in the country were unfamiliar with the local field and proposed their own interpretive frameworks and theoretical references, imported from “general” anthropology.¹ For over ten years, ethnology remained largely unchanged despite these outside influences, seemingly frozen inside a status quo amid drastically reduced funding due to the economic crisis, but also because of the difficulty of envisioning alternatives to the practices and objectives of the communist era [Hysa Kodra, 2014].

The arrival of an entirely new generation in the 2000s, represented here by Armanda Hysa and Nebi Bardhoshi, gradually rejuvenated the field by introducing research topics and new theoretical frameworks. Most importantly, they helped expand the horizons of a traditionally isolationist field, attending international conferences, engaging in foreign study tours, and, less frequently, conducting fieldwork projects abroad and initiating a critical meta-conversation about the value of ethnological production under communism.

1. I am borrowing a term used by Thomas Schippers to distinguish between the different ethnological perspectives on Europe at the time of the fall of the communist regimes [Schippers, 1991].



Photo 1 – View of Vermosh. Photograph by Refik Veseli, published in the magazine *Ylli* in August 1976.

This deliberately simplified overview clearly warrants greater nuance and detail, which is the intention of this introduction and several of the articles that follow. The issue is organized into three sections: 1. A section that directs a reflexive gaze towards the ethnology of the communist era, which was foundational but left a complex legacy; 2. A second section that reviews implications of this critique for an understanding of communist society as a whole and the contributions of a rejuvenated discipline for current anthropological research; and 3. A third section that features studies by anthropologists from Albania of post-communist social and cultural turmoil that involves migrations, religion, the economy, and political institutions.

■ Twin Legacies: Nationalism and Communism

A number of studies since the 2000s have analyzed the nature of the field of ethnology that developed in communist-ruled Albania and how its record can be interpreted from a contemporary perspective. These include studies by foreign researchers who conducted field studies in Albania in the 1990s [Schwandner-Sievers, 2009; Voell, 2011], but most are the work of young Albanian researchers seeking to situate the current field with respect to the past in order to illuminate their own professional practice. Significantly, the first of these articles, a critical review of the ideas of Rrok Zojzi—founder of Albanian ethnology after World War Two—concerning customary law [Bardhoshi, 2009], appeared in *Kultura Popullore*, the official journal of the Albanian Institute of Popular Culture. The author subsequently published his doctoral study of customary law in contemporary Albania [Bardhoshi, 2011].

Bardhoshi's book was the first of several doctoral projects that explore how their communist-era predecessors pursued their research topics and the present-day utility of their work. They include a study of agricultural cooperatives and their role in the transformation of working-class farmers [Lelaj, 2011] by Olsi Lelaj, an article by Armanda Hysa on the relationship between rural and urban environments [Hysa, 2011], and a study by Gerda Dalipaj of the concepts of the home and the domestic environment [Dalipaj, 2013]. Armanda Hysa provided the first historical overview of the field under communism, which was published in English in an article that blends source analysis and interviews with ethnologists and personal reflections about the author's contacts with ethnologists and their writings under the dictatorship in the early 2000s [Hysa, 2010]. She has subsequently published studies of the markets in several Albanian cities and the Balkans [Hysa, 2012; Hysa, 2014], a critical review of the ethnology of the communist period [Kodra-Hysa, 2013], and a portrait of changes in the field since 1991 [Hysa Kodra, 2014]. The remarks that follow are largely based on Hysa's pioneering work.

The creation of ethnography and folklore departments by the Institute of Sciences in 1947 represented an important turning point for the field. Indeed, the current state of the field reflects influences dating from the latter half of the twentieth century. This foundational period was itself an outgrowth of an older history that had received little critical anthropological attention until recently. Two major periods can be identified—before and after the proclamation of the Albanian State in 1912.

Until 1912, the territories inhabited by Albanians in the Balkans had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the fifteenth century. The gradual Ottoman withdrawal from this part of Europe beginning in the late eighteenth century and the rise of a number of nation-states including Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria (a process that continued throughout the nineteenth century) had two important consequences for

the future rise of Albanian ethnology. First, nationalism spread among Albanian intellectual circles, prompting some authors and scholars to begin collecting “folklore,” and second, the key components of an original national mythology were established, including indigenous origins, pre-Hellenic or Illyrian heritage, and resistance against the Ottoman invader.

At the same time, growing interest in the region among Westerners led to the publication of a large number of travel narratives. Austria-Hungary played a central role in the development of this genre, culminating in the publication of a book by Austrian Consul Georg von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien* in Iena in 1854 that is widely considered the first scholarly study of Albania and Albanians [Von Hahn, 1854]. Von Hahn’s book initiated a long tradition of Austrian research about Albania that continues to this day [See Pichler, 2014]. Before von Hahn, travel narratives by François Pouqueville (1826–1827), John Hobhouse (1813), Thomas Smart Hughes (1821), and William Martin Leake (1835) also awakened interest in this region of the Ottoman Empire, while also spreading a number of false notions, such as the idea of continuity between the occupants of the region during Antiquity and contemporary populations. As Afërdita Onuzi observes in an interview in this issue, beginning in the 1960s, these books provided ethnologists with a documentary foundation, although a critical assessment of these studies and their value as ethnographic sources remains to be published.

Research became professionalized beginning in the turn of the century, particularly following independence in 1912. Trained ethnologists remained rare, but publications about Albania, many by foreign authors—including an increasing number of professional ethnographers—were increasingly scientific. Inside Albania, the interest in folklore expanded beyond early nationalist authors to include a new generation of foreign-trained scholars. Early articles by Eqrem Çabej, an Austrian-trained linguist, focused on the songs and stories collected among Albanians living in Italy and the Balkans [Çabej, 1934].

There were efforts to institutionalize this burgeoning research field during the inter-war period and World War Two. In the 1920s, an Austrian archeologist, Carl Patsch, advanced plans for a national archeological and ethnographic museum [Clayer, 2012], and 15 volumes of oral traditions entitled *Treasures of the Nation* [*Visaret e kombit*] were progressively published between 1937 and 1944 [Zheji, 1998: 22–25]. The Institute of Albanian Studies in Tirana was founded during World War Two, the predecessor of the Institute of Science that was created in the early years of the communist era.

Under communism, ethnologists tended to disparage anything that preceded them, particularly ethnographic and folkloric materials that were collected between the wars. Because of their attempts to retrace the origins of an Albanian “ethnic group” as far as possible in the past, they believed that ancient and medieval authors were evidence of the ethnographic sources of the Albanian people. The nationalist shift among Albanian leaders in the 1960s was echoed among ethnologists who embraced the idea that they were documenting the vestiges of pre-Ottoman, Illyrian and Medieval precursors of contemporary Albanians. On the one hand, the “scientific” study of Albanian history and culture truly began only in 1947, but on the other, the sources and materials used as a foundation for the ethnology of Albania were being sought in the distant reaches of Antiquity.

At the institutional level, the founding of the University of Tirana in 1957 represented a turning point for the discipline that redistributed scholarly research into a growing number of institutes. The folklore department became the Folklore Institute



Photo 2 – Celebration. Photograph published in the magazine *Ylli* in May 1980, no attribution.

in 1960, the ethnography department was transferred to the Institute of History and Linguistics, and in 1972 the Institutes left the University and were attached to the recently founded Academy of Sciences. By 1979, folklorists and ethnographers were united in a new Institute of Popular Culture (*Instituti i kulturës popullore*, ИКР) that continues to depend on the Academy of Sciences to the present day and retained its original name until 2008. At the time, it was called the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art History [*Instituti i antropologjisë kulturore dhe i studimit të artit*, ИАКСА), joining the Center for Albanian Studies (*Qendra e studimeve albanologjike*, QSA), a new organization that was separate from the Academy of Sciences.

■ The Reflexive Turn in the 2000s

There was no sudden renaissance of anthropological research or restructuring of research institutes and departments following the fall of the communist regime in 1991. The most significant change was the end of ideological control by a single party,

a new form of freedom that was accompanied by a profoundly negative side effect—a drastic reduction in financial support for scholarly activities. Only in the early 2000s did the renovation of the field begin with the hiring of young researchers. It was several years later that the effects of this rebirth began to be felt. Armanda Hysa locates the pivotal moment that signaled the end of the status quo in 2004 [Hysa Kodra, 2014: 29]. One indication of this “paradigm shift”² was the emergence of a critical perspective that has re-examined the practices and findings of the ethnological knowledge base leftover from the communist period.

The goal of the issue’s first section is to demonstrate the importance of this new criticism to the renewal of the field. Rigels Halili draws on recent studies to propose an overview of the development of ethnography and folklore studies in Albania and, for the first time, in Kosovo. Because of Albania’s diplomatic isolation following breaks with Yugoslavia in 1948, with the USSR in 1961, and with China in 1978, the development of the field is generally considered inside the borders of the State of Albania. As Rigels Halili reminds us, however, the nationalist paradigm that informed ethnology and folklore studies at the time raises, albeit implicitly, the question of the unity of the Albanian people, even beyond the political boundary between Albania and Yugoslavia of the time. Albanian ethnologists from Kosovo faced similar questions, and the contrast between the two contexts sheds new light on the evolution of the discipline.

2. Here I borrow the title of Klaus Roth’s introduction to a recent issue of the journal *Ethnologia Balkanica* [Roth, 2014]. This collection about the current state of ethnological studies in the Balkans is a precious resource.



Photo 3 –View of Vlorë. Photograph by Petrit Çela published in the magazine *Ylli* in April 1976.

Armanda Hysa offers an example of a constructive critique of studies produced since the fall of communism by pointing to the marginal nature of urban studies. Analyzing three texts that employ the city as an ethnological object, she demonstrates how these studies, which were submitted to the same priorities behind rural studies at the time—nationalism, historicism, and materialism—nevertheless constituted a laboratory that stimulated ideas about the city and its relationships to rural regions that continue to fuel the development of a distinct, recognized urban ethnology. Olsi Lelaj analyzes the Albanian communism in its many manifestations as a research topic in contemporary anthropology. He explains why, until recently, this period has been the object of disinterest and rejection, proposing a reflective foundation for the construction of an anthropology of Albanian communism “under the sign of modernity,” to cite the title of his recent book [Lelaj, 2015].

As Hysa observes with considerable accuracy, the field that has typically been labeled as a “history of ethnology in Albania” ultimately involved a small group of people—between three and seven individuals, depending on the period [Hysa Kodra, 2014: 23]. Critical perspectives therefore cannot neglect personal and subjective aspects of the ethnological practices and products of the period, and it is important to retrace individual itineraries in order to understand the influence of interpersonal relations on the development of the discipline. For this reason, in answer to these three articles, this issue also features interviews with Mark Tirta and Afërdita Onuzi, two ethnologists who worked during the communist period. Their itineraries and the gaze that they bring to today’s field will hopefully enrich readers’ understandings of the three analytical articles.

■ Towards an Ethnography of Albanian Communism

The articles that follow essentially implement the study of Albanian communism as an anthropological research topic as Olsi Lelaj proposes. Indeed, an internal critique of the field is the first step towards an ethnography of Albanian communism: The history of Albanian ethnology cannot be envisioned independently of the political, economic, and ideological conditions of the period.

Eckehard Pistrick offers an excellent example of this orientation in an article about the process and aftermath of a joint expedition of Albanian and East German ethno-musicologists in Southern Albania in 1957. It was while preparing for a field study in this same region in the 2000s that he discovered the archives of this expedition.³ Exploring the subject in greater depth, he reveals the concrete functioning of ethnographic research in its political context.

Mikaela Minga’s research process is similar: As a trained ethno-musicologist, working on the present state of a musical genre that emerged during the inter-war period—the songs of city of Korçë—gradually caused her to become interested in the communist period. Although not specifically grounded in a reflexive approach to the ethno-musicology of the period, her study demonstrates how combining multiple sources and methods (public and private, written, auditory, and visual) and interviews of survivors of the musical scene enhance our understanding of both the communist era and its contemporary legacy.

The article by Gilles de Rapper and Anouck Durand about photographic production during the communist era poses similar questions, asking: What should be done with public and private photographic archives that are currently available to us? Under what circumstances can they be considered as tools for the development of our knowledge of the communist era and its heritage? Based on their analysis of

3. The 1957 expedition was the subject of an international conference in Tirana in 2014 whose proceedings have been published [Pistrick, 2016]. See also a recent book based on a dissertation by the same author [Pistrick, 2015].

one category of photographs from the period—amateur photography—the authors propose an ethnography of photography that considers images less as sources than as objects of study in their own right.

Bledar Kondi's contribution about death and the rituals surrounding it goes still further and is not limited to the communist era. The author emphasizes the gaps in research concerning death in a context in which any religious manifestation was condemned as a remnant of the past and an indication of backwardness. Drawing on the few available observations and sources from before the communists rose to power, he attempts to discern the meaning of death and the ritual reactions that it elicits.⁴ This in turn allows him to address the question of how rituals were—and are—transformed, both during and after communism, revealing the complexity of the communist heritage and the difficulty of imagining what currently constitutes the nation and tradition.

Arsim Canolli's article asks similar questions about a subject rarely addressed by Albanian ethnology—nutrition as a daily practice. Analyzing the nutritional choices and practices of two Kosovar families in the wake of the 1999 war, he shows that nutritional behaviors reveal attitudes about political and economic change. The purpose of including an article on Kosovar Albanians in a journal issue dedicated to Albania was to illustrate the existence of contacts and collaborations between anthropologists on both sides of the border and to remind us that, despite its enormous ramifications, the war in Kosovo has evinced little interest among Albanian anthropologists to date.

■ Contemporary Upheavals

Other transformations in post-communist Albania have had far greater impact than the reinvention of anthropological research. Many of these upheavals have not received the scholarly attention that they deserve. Emigration, for example, has been a deeply complex issue in the country since the 1990s but has seldom been the focus of systematic study. Researchers have only recently begun to explore the effects of opening the borders after decades of isolation, both internally and on neighboring countries such as Greece and Italy. Albanian migration has been generally well examined by geographers [Sintès, 2010; Vullnetari, 2012], but anthropologists, including foreign scholars, have largely neglected this important subject.⁵ Among researchers who have examined the question of migration, Nataša Gregorič Bon, a Slovenian anthropologist, studied south Albania, a region that is torn between Albania and Greece, since the 2000s [Gregorič Bon, 2007]. Her article discusses the effects of emigration on the region from the perspective of the anthropology of space, a new approach to analyzing the Albanian context.

Mentor Mustafa's study of the pilgrimage at Mount Tomor in Southern Albania shows a similar effort to apply new theoretical frameworks to topics that have experienced profound, rapid change. The end of communism in Albania ended anti-religious policies that lasted from 1944 to 1967, when every remaining place of worship was either closed or destroyed. This policy, which ended only in 1991, has extremely complex implications as well as roots in the emergent Albanian national movement in the nineteenth century. The coexistence of at least three major denominations in Albania—with Islam in the majority, and Orthodox and Catholic Christianity in the minority—has long posed problems for intellectual, political, and religious elites [Clayer, 2007; Endresen, 2012]. Few scholarly studies, particularly by local anthropologists, have explored contemporary Albanian religious life, however, despite numerous transitions that have significant social and cultural ramifications, including the reconstruction of places of worship, the revitalization of holy days and rites of passage, and

4. See also a detailed description of these ritual practices by the same author [Kondi, 2012].

5. The recent dissertation of Gerda Dalipaj, whose absence from this issue is regrettable, also deserves mention here. The study examined how migrants envision and achieve—or not—the construction of new houses [Dalipaj, 2016]. The study merits attention if only because Gerda Dalipaj is one of the first Albanian anthropologists to conduct field research outside of Albania, in Greece (this is also true of Armanda Hysa who, after field research about the markets in Skopje in Macedonia, began a new field project about marriages between Serbs and Albanians residing in Serbia). Indeed, migration is central in the work of Eckehard Pistrick and has also been explored by several other authors [Kretsi, 2005; de Rapper, 2005].

the coexistence of different religious communities. Mustafa presents here among the few ethnographies that has studied a pilgrimage associated with the Bektashi community, a variety of Islam inherited from the Ottoman Empire that he interprets through the lens of several recent anthropological theories. His article emphasizes the ambiguities and tensions that traverse such ritual practices, which have the potential of transforming them into moments of resistance and protest.

Economic upheavals are a third post-communist transformation that merits close critical attention. Typically characterized as a transition from a planned to a market-based economy, these changes suggest a rich variety of new research contexts and topics. In this issue, economic change is explored through a watershed event triggered by the collapse of pyramidal savings schemes in Albania and other former communist countries in the 1990s. These bankruptcies of companies that had promised their depositors miraculous yields provoked a widespread political crisis and outbreaks of violence in Albania in 1997 that were labeled a “civil war.” The contribution to this issue by Smoki Musaraj demonstrates how an anthropological approach can be used to analyze phenomena that have primarily been considered from political or economic perspectives in the past. The author of a dissertation study in economic anthropology about these events [Musaraj, 2012], here she focuses on the ways in which they altered the social status of the concept of value: In an economically unstable context and amid scarce financial resources, were savings institutions being used by depositors as conversion tools between different values involving family networks, migrant remittances, or work?

The 1997 “civil war” laid bare the fragility of the post-communist State. It required several years and the assistance of international military forces to re-establish order. The transition from a supposedly strong dictatorship to weakly grounded democratic institutions presents a different visage of change in the post-communist era, change that forms the backdrop to the contribution by Nebi Bardhoshi. Here, Bardhoshi employs legal anthropology, broadly neglected since 1990, to investigate the State and legal institutions as well as their reception at the local level. He uses the notion of legal pluralism to explore the complex relationships between governmental norms and the norms of customary law (which, like religion, was abolished under communism) [Bardhoshi, 2015]. Specifically, his article examines a phenomenon called “blood vengeance,” that is associated with customary law and has attracted considerable media attention in Albania and abroad. To combat false ideas and over-simplifications, he promotes the idea of a detailed ethnography of the phenomenon based on a critique of the existing literature and contrasts between internal (Albanian) and external perspectives on vengeance and customary law.

This collection of scholarly perspectives on Albanian realities seeks to open the door to the ethnology of Albania precisely when it finds itself at a turning point in its history. Similar past undertakings indicate the scale of this ambition, including a special 1989 issue of *L'Ethnographie* on Albania edited by Pierre Cabanes [Cabanes, 1989]. In addition to history, geography, and archeology, the only ethnologists represented in the issue were members of the Institute of Popular Culture. Nearly 20 years later, a dossier in *Anthropological Notebooks* devoted to *Contributions to Albanian Studies* [Gregorič Bon, 2008] confirmed a lack of Albanian ethnologists among international social scientists.⁶ The present issue demonstrates that anthropological research about Albania has rediscovered its vitality and that, although considerable progress has been made, the field clearly has great potential for continued development. A final purpose of this issue is to celebrate the unusual diversity and robustness of exchanges between researchers from so many different horizons and research traditions.⁷ Building on a tradition that began under communist rule, and in a spirit of openness, this special issue of *Ethnologie Française* seeks to provide a new foundation for the anthropology of Albania. ■

6. A notable 2002 publication in Albanian studies that does not contain a single contribution by an Albanian anthropologist [Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, 2002].

7. See also an edited volume that implements such exchanges, although limited to the subject of family and kinship, and that involves both historians and anthropologists [Hemming, Kera, and Pandelejmoni, 2012].

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