

## SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE ALBANIAN ALPS DURING COMMUNISM

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**ABSTRACT:** *Social surveys were conducted by the authors in 1994 and 1995 in the Albanian Alps village of Bogë. Possible social changes that may have occurred during the period of Communist government, between 1944 and 1991 were investigated in four categories, including traditional dress, patriarchal households, marriage ceremony, and marriage patterns. Only tiny vestiges of the once rich unique dress styles exist. Only a quarter of the current households exhibit traditional patriarchy. The marriage ceremony has fared better, appearing unchanged by communism while village exogamy continues with some alterations.*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a paucity of information about the mountaineers of the Albanian Alps. Some old popular accounts of these people are available but even though Durham (1928; 1985), Lane (1923), and others wrote entertaining accounts of their travels in this region, they did no systematic research. Cozzi (1912) wrote excellent descriptions of social life and Coon (1950) provided wonderful physical anthropological data on people. However, there seems to be no information concerning the mountaineers during the communist period, from 1944 to 1991. During this period, lowland urban Albania was changed dramatically, both positively (Rugg, 1994; Sjöberg, 1992) and negatively (Sjöberg 1992). Now there is another upheaval in Albania, with the new freedoms that have come with democratization.

The question arises: Has fifty years of communism changed the mountaineers' way of life? In an attempt to answer this question the authors conducted an extensive survey of heads of households in the Albanian Alps village of Bogë (Figure 1) in 1994, returning in 1995 to survey

married women. Bogë was chosen since it is the birth village of professor Rakaj. The questionnaire elicited information on demographics, household economics, and land tenure. One of the study's objectives was to investigate cultural persistence through fifty years of communism. The majority of the vast changes that have occurred in Albania have bypassed Bogë. Bogans report that from 1944 until 1963 when they were forced into an agricultural cooperative by the government, life changed little. But the establishment of the cooperative wrought huge changes in their lives as their land and animals were expropriated and the people, including children, were required to work for the cooperative. With the collapse of communism the people have generally returned to pre-cooperative lifestyles herding stock and cutting wood, and in many ways, the activities villagers are involved in today are the same ones they have been involved in for 500 years.

Bogë was settled in 1480 (Durham, 1985; Ulqini, 1990) and over time has grown to 532 inhabitants. Many other Alps villages were established earlier, but limited water inhibited settlement in the "Hole of Bogë".

The 68 dwellings, housing 96 households are spread along about two kilometers of *Përroi i*

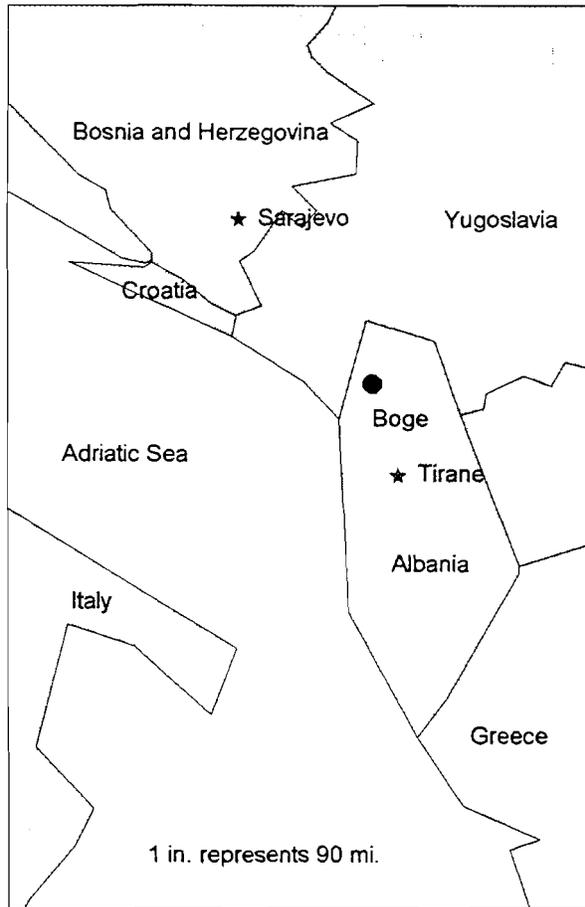


Figure 1: Albania and location of study village.

*Thatë*, the Valley of the Dry Stream. There are several buildings other than dwellings including a Catholic church, two small lumber mills, a combination bar/ convenience store/pool hall, an elementary school, and a municipal storage building. There are three functioning springs, and one spring that only flows in winter (Figure 2). No Bogan home has plumbing.

### THE SURVEY

Each half-hour survey was conducted in people's yards to avoid the problem of "hospitality". A college professor commands much respect and if

one enters a home, Albanian hospitality prescribed certain protocol, including cigarettes, coffee, and raki (a harsh homemade plum brandy) as well as cheese, bread, honey, and fruit.

Confusion reigns paramount when an American guest does not smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, or alcohol, as all Albanian males seem to indulge generously in all three. Consequently, interviews were conducted in the yard amid the kibitzing neighbors, rowdy children, curious passers-by, rooting pigs, barking dogs, smelly sheep dung and clouds of flies.

The bilingual multi-page questionnaire was read to participants in Albanian. Half of the interviewees were heads of the households, but responses were frequently a consensus opinion of all family members present. Some topics addressed were:

- (1) Possible impact of communism upon the mountaineers unique dress.
- (2) Search for continued existence of the patriarchal household.
- (3) Persistence of marriage traditions.

### TRADITIONAL DRESS

Pre-World War II travelers in Albania consistently noted the wide variety of dress that they encountered in the mountains of northern Albania. Each affiliated groups distinctive dress (Durham, 1928; 1985; Lane, 1923; Coon, 1950) helped in identifying both friend and foe from a distance (Durham, 1985) which was critical because of the legal system called, *Kanuni i Lek Dukagjini* (The Code of Lekë Dukagjini) (Gjeçov, 1989), a portion of which codified blood feuds.

Today there is no aspect of Bogan dress that distinguishes one family from another or from other Albanians. This suppression is incongruous in light of the fact that the communists frequently represented peasants in traditional dress in the ubiquitous mosaic murals and bas-reliefs on public buildings. It is extremely clear that clan specific dress did not survive in Bogë or other Alps

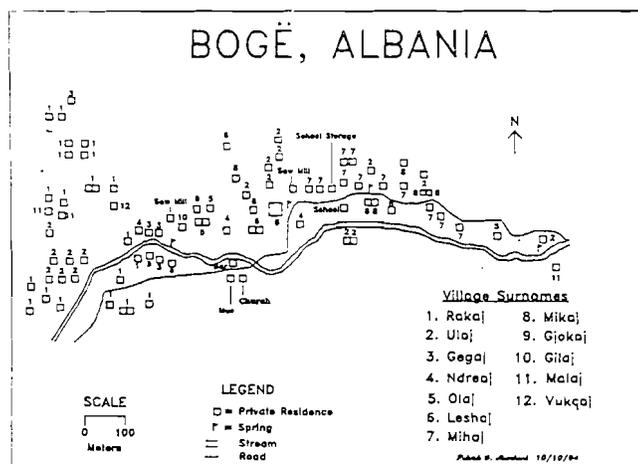


Figure 2: The village of Bogë.

communities through communism.

Current visitors to Bogë find men and women wearing what appear to be (and frequently are) western hand-me-down clothes while working in the fields, tending animals, carrying water, and knitting. The sight of a woman in a tight, brightly colored, dress or skirt hoeing corn or scrambling into the back of a truck is very common. Many Bogan women, especially older ones, always wear head scarves as well as black mourning clothes for up to a year after the death of a male relative. Widows seldom remarry and may wear black for the remainder of their lives. A few old men wear the traditional *kapicë leshi* (woolen hat).

The authors found one social custom, modesty, that has persisted strongly in the mountains, especially strong among the women, but also evident among the men. Women wear only dresses or modest tops and skirts, sometimes with pants underneath, but never, never tight jeans or shorts. When the two young women who were part of the survey group wore either one of these garments, they were subject to many hard looks, especially from the older women. Professor Rakaj's mother, Grandma Rakaj, at 72 years old, was particularly critical.

## TRADITIONAL PATRIARCHY

Early travelers and researchers described the traditional household as an extended family, including not only a patriarch and his wife together with their unmarried children, but also their married sons, with their wives and children. Unmarried brothers and less commonly married brothers and their families were frequently present also (Kaser, 1992; Coon, 1950; Zickel and Iwaskiw, 1994).

All decisions including who would marry whom, what crops would be planted, who would work as a shepherd and who as a farmer, etc. were made by the eldest male. Even though there is a total lack of information between Coon's 1929 research and World War II, the authors speculate that this organization, dictated by the Code of Lek, probably existed up until the communists took over during World War II. In all areas investigated there has been a diminishing of importance of the traditional patriarchal household. Traditional households include a patriarch who decides 1) how many children the family will have, 2) how money will be spent, 3) what the dining sequence will be, and 4) who the marriage partners for sons and daughters will be (see later section on "Marriage Traditions.")

Unlike the situation in villages in southern Albania and the *Malesia i Vogël* (Small Highlands) which have lost nearly all middle-aged workers who have gone to Greece seeking employment (United States Department of State, 1995), the current population structure of Bogë contains representatives of all age groups. When questioned, Bogans commented that they were so isolated that they did not know how to seek employment abroad.

During the communist period, especially after the establishment of the agricultural cooperative, there were economic incentives for splitting the patriarchal households. Garden plots were allocated by household, not by the number of people in the household, so the same number of people could control twice as much land if they formed two households. Low cost loans and grants were also made available for families to construct their own homes. The current situation of ninety-six families living in sixty-eight homes indicates only limited persistence of traditional family organization.

There is also a wide range in ages and in the length of time heads of households have been married, once again pointing away from the traditional household organization. Under the traditional arrangement, the eldest male would be patriarch, leaving heads-of-households being generally quite old. This old man would have been married a long time to work his way up to the patriarchal position (Bërxfholi and Qiriaz, 1986; Central Intelligence Agency, 1993; Zickel and Iwaskiw, 1994).

Furthermore the average number of people in each household is 5.6 and most households are clustered near this mean. Pre-World War II households frequently had fifteen members (Durham, 1928) with some reports of thirty or more (Jacques, 1995).

Included among the ninety-six households in Bogë, are the following:

- (1) 2 households with a total of 4 single brothers.
- (2) households with married brothers.
- (3) 20 households with married sons, including one that also had 3 single brothers.

Less than a quarter of Bogan households exhibit traditional composition, not strong support for the persistence of traditional household structure through the communist period.

Other indicators of a diminution of the traditional patriarchy include dining arrangements. Pre-World War II writers (Durham, 1928) reported that men and older boys always ate first, followed by the women and children, who often ate in the kitchen. In 1992, as the first American in a Bogan household, author Cook ate this way. However, on later visits to the same household everyone ate together. In 1995 when Bogan women were asked in what order the family ate, they laughed. "Of course we all eat together," or words to that effect was the reply of 98 of 99 women.

Over half of the women surveyed responded that the number of children they would have was a joint decision with their husband. A little over a third reported that the husband made this decision alone. Once more, there has been an erosion of the traditional patriarchal decision making process.

Decisions on how to spend household money were also historically made by the family patriarch. In present day Bogë, 15 percent of the women surveyed reported that they made spending decisions independently of their husbands, while 39 percent made financial decisions jointly with their husbands. In less than half of the households (44 percent) did the women report that their husbands made these decisions alone. The follow-up question sought their satisfaction with their decision making process. Over half of the respondents were satisfied, while 36 percent were not.

The new openness that has come to Albania, with its associated freedom of movement will almost certainly cause a further reduction in the number of traditional households as young families learn of economic opportunities elsewhere and move away from the village.

## MARRIAGE TRADITIONS

Ernesto Cozzi (1912), an Italian Catholic priest wrote about Albanian mountain women describing the typical marriage ceremony as a

vener of Catholicism laid over cultural traditions. Cozzi described the tightly defined series of events leading up to the consummation of the union. Clearly this procedure had little to do with Catholicism.

Of the 99 women surveyed in Bogë, 91 had their marriages arranged. Furthermore, 67 percent of these marriages had been arranged by male family members indicating that traditional patriarchy is continuing in this aspect of household life. When we asked these women if their daughter's marriages would be arranged, only 16 percent replied in the affirmative while 28 percent replied negatively. However, 42 percent of the women responded that they did not know and 12 percent refused to answer (a very high percentage in this survey). Over half of the women surveyed in Bogë are unsure of where they stand on this critical cultural issue.

#### **A Traditional Marriage**

In Bogë, lived Zogë, a young woman who was engaged to be married. Her father and uncles had identified her future husband and made arrangements for her marriage. Her fiance, Fran, whom Zogë had only met twice, was from near Lezhë, about 100 kilometers south of Bogë.

How did a young man from Lezhë get chosen as a spouse for a young woman from Bogë? The two communities are far apart and culturally different. In this particular case, Zogë's mother Drana had relatives in Lezhë, and when they learned that Zogë's father and brothers were looking for a spouse for her, Fran was mentioned. The arrangements progressed from there.

In 1994 Fran, accompanied by his sister, came to Bogë for a visit. Zogë and Fran were closely supervised, as it was not proper for them to be alone together. However, it was obviously an opportunity for Zogë's family and friends to become acquainted with a future in-law. A couple of weeks later, Fran's parents made a formal visit that precipitated special meals, and some serious discussion as well as much drinking of raki. Overall it seemed a jovial gathering of family and friends. When it was all over, Zogë's uncle reported a problem that would delay the wedding once again. However, nobody was willing to explain the problem to outsiders.

It was very obvious that Zogë was not involved in the process, although she explained the marriage ceremony as best she could. Her passive role did not even allow her to be involved in setting the wedding date. She also fully accepted this situation, even to the extent of marrying a young man whom she did not know. In fact when pushed on this issue, Zogë replied with the same words that Cozzi had recorded eighty years earlier, "It is my destiny [to marry whomever my family decides]."

There would be a party at the bride's parents home in which Zogë could not participate. She would be sequestered "with downcast eyes" in a bedroom by herself. The wedding entourage would then attend a party at her fiance's home. The bride would be isolated in a back room as before but about halfway through the day she would come out and slowly raise her eyes and then she could participate. That night when all other guests went home, Zogë would stay and sleep with her new husband, in his father's house. From that time on she would be part of the new household. There would be neither a marriage license, a civil ceremony, nor any Catholic ceremony before the above events occurred. Sometime, perhaps "a couple of weeks later," the couple would go to Lezhë and register the marriage with the government; and sometime after that they would seek the blessings of a priest. The above process is similar to the one described in greater detail by Cozzi. Clearly, tradition still takes precedence over government and church, even though these people have claimed to be Catholic for several hundred years.

#### **Village Exogamy**

The need to find a spouse outside the village is a result of the exogamous tradition of these people. Historically mountaineers always went outside their *fis*, or patrilineal grouping to find wives. The patrilineal "blood line" was very important and inviolate while the matrilineal "milk line" was of no significance. Often members of a *fis* consistently dealt with the same remote *fis*, exchanging daughters for marriage (Coon, 1950). It was improper for anyone from the village to marry someone more closely related than a seventh cousin.

The current situation in Bogë strongly indicates that the exogamous nature of this society continues. Out of the 135 married and widowed women in Bogë, only five were born there. The other 130 were born in 49 other villages, but 6 villages were the birthplace of 46 (34 percent) of them. Seventy girls who were born in Bogë and left to be married went to 24 different villages, but 47 percent went to the same 6 villages that produced wives for Bogan men, suggesting that the trading of girls between fis still exists. However, when these marriages are investigated in greater detail utilizing surnames, no correlation is found. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that girls are presently "swapped" between relatively small areas, but not between specific fis.

## CONCLUSIONS

This investigation of cultural persistence in the northern Albanian highland village of Bogë indicated that pre-World War II culture has changed in all areas that were investigated. Distinct dress, once required among the northern mountaineers for survival is gone, replaced by ragged nondescript clothing.

Only a fourth of the households contain some of the traditional family structure, e.g. unmarried brothers of the head of household being part of the household. Money decisions and the number of children desired are frequently made jointly by husband and wife. At mealtime there is no longer a dining sequence, but the entire household eats together.

Ninety-nine percent of the women surveyed had arranged marriages, with most being arranged by male relatives. There is much confusion however, on the matter of whether their daughters should have arranged marriages. This uncertainty may indicate future change in this area also. Other marriage traditions including the ceremony itself and village exogamy have persisted strongly through the communist period, although there has been some modification of village exogamy as it no longer appears that girls are "traded" between distant fis. A girl is likely to be married in the village or small region from which her mother

came, but is not likely to marry someone with her mother's maiden name.

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