



The Xhubeleta:
a Woman's Perspective



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The Xhubleta: *a Woman's perspective*

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by
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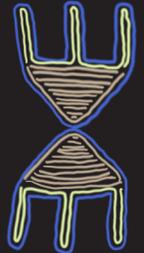
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Authorship

All members of the team would outline sections of the report together. Following this, individual team members would outline single sections more in detail, and write the initial drafts of them. We would then switch sections, and a new team member would edit and introduce quotes into a section. As the overall organization of this report has been shifted multiple times as ideas have evolved, segments of many different sections were moved to other parts of the report and fit in there. Because of this, no section has remained in its initially written state, and with so much rearranging and additional material added, there is no author that can claim credit for any given section.

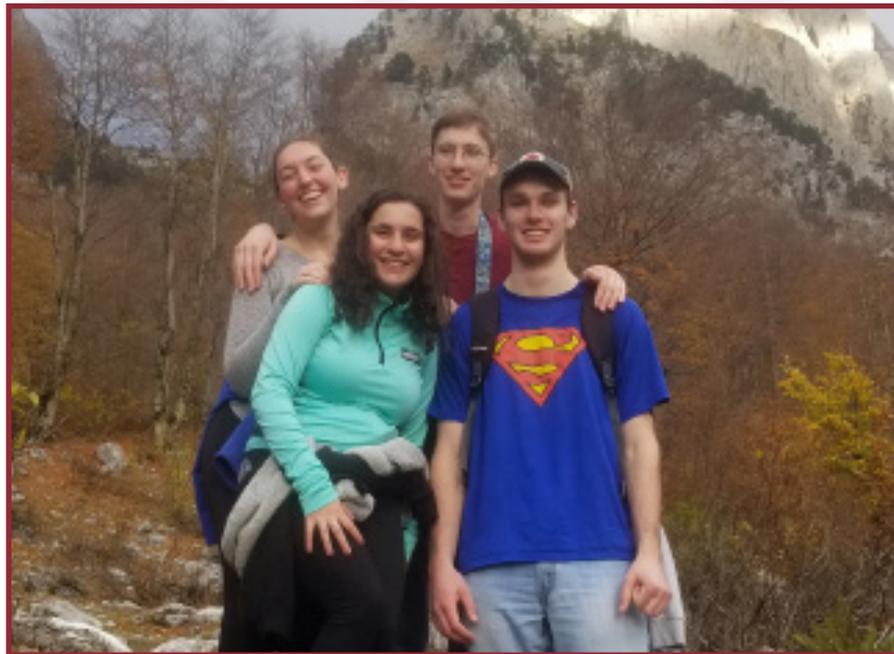


The goal of our project was to understand and document the changing experience of women in northern Albania over the past century, using a traditional costume, the xhubleta, as a lens to see into their lives. Women no longer wear the xhubleta in everyday life, but it is still an important cultural artifact worn on special events and passed down matrilineally. We interviewed elderly women in rural areas with personal ties to the xhubleta to give voice to their stories. We found contradictions surrounding the various cultural meanings assigned to the dress, with women's subjugation under patriarchal customs co-existing with women's pride in wearing it.



This report was created from a partnership with GO2 Albania. GO2 is a non-government organization involved in sustainable urban planning. Their vision is “a better quality of life for our communities.” This includes preserving culture. This project is a stepping stone in a campaign to get the xhubleta recognized as a cultural artifact by UNESCO.

This project was undertaken between August and December of 2018. After conducting preliminary research in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA, the team travelled to Albania in mid October. Here, they conducted field work in a variety of villages including Shllak, Vermosh, Reç, Theth, and Tamare, occurring from mid October to early December 2018. The project focuses on the women of



The four students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) that worked on this project were: Erin Conneilly, Edward Krawczyk, Tina Barsoumian, and Garth Hull.

northern Albania, more specifically their experiences with the xhubleta, a traditional, bell-shaped Balkan dress, throughout their lives. These stories are being lost in modern day Albania due to movement towards modernization. The aim of this project was to illuminate the stories of these women, using traditional dress as a lens into their lives.

The team would like to give thanks to all those who helped them complete this project. A special thank you to the WPI advisors of the Tirana, Albania project center, Professor Robert Hersh, Professor Leslie Dodson, and Professor Peter Christopher, as well as those at GO2, Sonila Hasaj, Eltjana Shkreli, and Irhan Jubica. Without them, this project would not have become a reality.

The students would also like to thank Professor Hektor Kashuri for telling the team about his life in Albania at the onset of this project, as well as Philip Waterman who helped the team with their initial research. Thank you to Vanessa Bumpus at the Worcester Historical Museum, Professor Dominic Golding at WPI, and Jeffrey Forgeng at the Worcester Art Museum who spoke with the team about setting up their final presentation. The students would also like to thank Fisnik Muca for his help in connecting them with sources and getting their project off with their first interview.

The team thanks all those who took time out of their days to speak to them about the xhubleta. This includes those who have considerable knowledge on the xhubleta including Gjon Dukgilaj - owner of Tradita, Fatmir Juka at the Shkoder Historical Museum, Rita Shkurtaj, Azgan Berhami, and Professor Hamza. The team would like to give a very special thank you to all of the women that they spoke with: Prena, Tonine Boloj, File Nika, Lule Sokoli, Pashkë Noja, Age Vuktilaj, Dile Vaçoj, and Zinë Markaj.



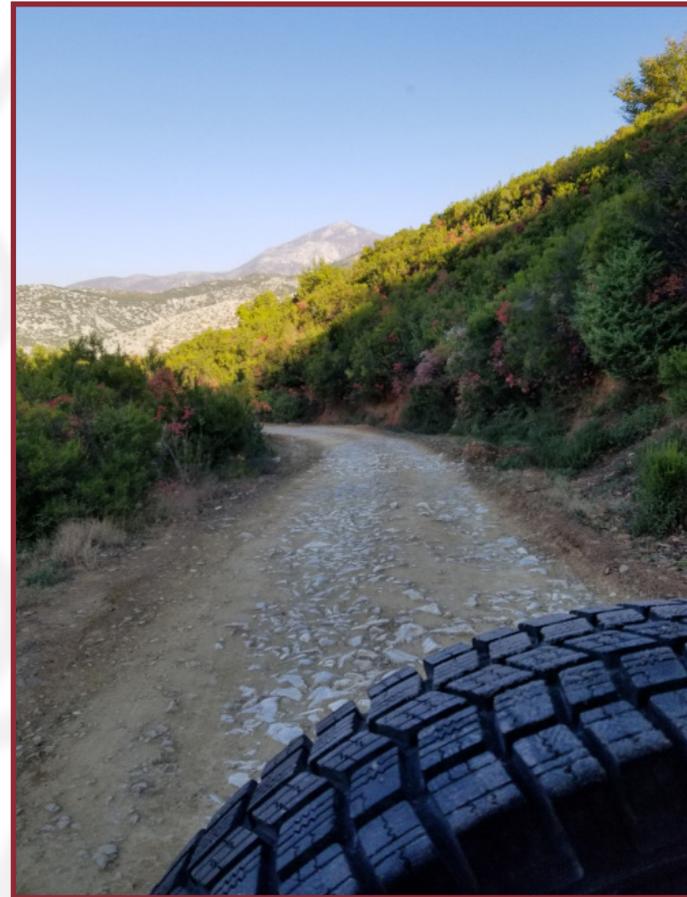


The aim of this project was to understand the shifting position of women's place in northern Albania, especially over the past century. In order to understand this, we used the xhubleta as a lens through which to view the lives of these women.

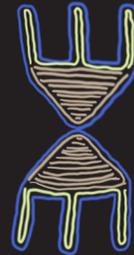
We spoke with a variety of different people and groups, each with different experiences with the xhubleta. Our primary sources of information were the women of northern Albania. These were the women we wanted to learn from, to hear their stories and feel what it was like for them to live in northern Albania throughout their lives.

In our interviews, we used the xhubleta as a means of uncovering stories from the lives of these women. Despite the vastly different lives that these women had, each had some connection to the traditional costume of their ancestors. Some of the women we spoke with wore the xhubleta as a child in everyday life, while others wore it only for their wedding. By hearing the many stories of these women, we formed an understanding of the changing dynamic that governed women's lives in northern Albania.

We interviewed ten women with direct ties to the xhubleta. These women were selected based on their personal ties to the xhubleta. We wanted to speak with women who had a strong connection to the dress and those that were willing to share their stories. Many of these women live in somewhat isolated rural areas in the mountains of northern Albania. To speak with them, we travelled to their homes. (A map of our journey through Shllak is included on the left.)



View of the road taken through Shllak from the offroad vehicle needed to navigate the area.





Differing circumstances in these women's lives created vast differences in their experiences. Some of the most important factors in deciding these experiences included age, social standing, location, and maternal connection. Rather than speak to many women about their opinions of the dress, we wanted to develop closer connections with the women we did talk to. We conducted longer interviews, trying to gather a thorough collection of their experiences through the dress. We felt that these personal connections would allow us to share the voices of these women through their own words, not ours.

Other sources that we spoke with included collectors of traditional costume, museum directors, and traditional costume enthusiasts in Albania. From these interviews we hoped to gain a better grasp of the historical context in Albania. We wanted to understand how changes in Albania's history have affected the lives of women; for example, how the introduction of communism impacted the woman's place in the family. In addition, we hoped to learn about the traditions surrounding the xhubleta, including how a community or family came together to create a xhubleta. These interviews were beneficial in conveying the broader circumstances of how a woman's place in society shifted in parallel to the dress. Using this contextualizing information, we were able to ask the women questions about

During our interviews, we recorded the voices of the women as they shared their stories with us. Instead of us relaying their lives through our voices, we wanted to share the stories directly from the women that lived through these experiences. These videos can be found online, at xhubleta.org. The site includes much of the research we gathered, such as the information found in this report. In depth personal pages of the women that we spoke to are available, along with photographs relating to them.

Some of the women did not feel comfortable with their likeness being included in this piece, so their images, and in some cases names, were omitted.



The team interviewing Lule and Pashkë, two women from Shllak.







Dress plays an important role in the development of individual identity, and helps the individual to understand where they fit as a member of their society. How a person dresses, as well as the manner and occasions on which they display their clothes, plays a role in the creation of their identity. The cultural, religious, and historical implications of their clothing determine what is visibly expressed about them (Durham, 1999). As Hansen (2004, p. 372) says, “because it both touches the body and faces outward toward others, dress has a dual quality.” The inward side helps an individual to express their sense of self, which is also shaped by their interactions with others.



An interviewee, File Nika, from Shllak with her xhubleta.

These interactions, though, are shaped by outward appearance. This appearance determines how interactions play out, with clothing revealing the wearer’s personality and social position through fashion and quality of clothing. Clothing may also signify accomplishments and rank, such as

through a uniform (Arvanitidou, 2011).

A common dress throughout a culture, in the form of historical traditional costume, can ground an individual in their heritage and community. These forms of dress can bring pride to the wearer, and provide a sense of identity (O’Neil, 1998). They may also hint at unattractive cultural practices tied to them through their history, though, such as social inequalities and oppression. Between cultures, differences in dress showcase uniqueness of groups from different temporal and geographic locations (Dodd, 2000). These differences may take the form of coloration, material, style, or explicit symbols on clothing. Clothing is a visual language (Lurie, 1981) through these symbols and differences. This language also extends to the behaviors tied to how clothing is worn: when it is worn and the behaviors of those surrounding it at the time.

Dress and clothing constantly remind the wearer of what is expected of them in terms of behavior, while simultaneously signifying to others how the wearer can and should be treated (Kuper, 1973). What is worn is often dictated by a culture for different ages and genders. Different tasks and occupations may dictate clothing, too (Arvanitidou et al, 2011): farmworkers and elected officials would have different outfits fitting their needed levels of formality vs. function.

In non-industrial societies, such as pre-communist Albania, high levels of individual expression through dress is often muted by an overbearing expression of group identity in dress (Dodd et al, 2000), where clothing mainly shows the wearer’s place in a larger group (Banet-Weiser, 1999).



Prior to 1946, social life in northern Albanian society was characterized by large families of up to 50 members, all living in close proximity (Whitaker, 1981). A woman's role in this extended family was to present a smoothly running household to her husband, such that a male would not be troubled by household problems (Backer, 1979). Such household tasks included food preparation, cleaning and cooking, fire tending, and mending and making clothing. A man and his guests would expect to be waited on by a woman, without performing any of these tasks themselves. This labor would not be thought of as work, but simply a woman's duty. The dismissal of women's efforts led to many other responsibilities being piled on top of these household chores (Backer, 1979).

Women bore the responsibility for childcare but still needed to work productively, so tasks fell on women that were "compatible with simultaneous child watching" (Wayland, 1994, p. 289). Such tasks must have not required intense concentration, been repetitive in nature, safe for nearby children, and could be carried out at home. The division of roles that developed from these requirements were based not on ability, but on practicality. Over time, these gender roles remained, despite the fact that women and men were physically capable of performing each other's tasks (Wayland, 1994).

Textile work was a common task that fit these requirements. In northern Albania, a tool called the *forku*, a light, thin wooden plank a few feet in length, allowed mobile

spinning of wool collected from the sheep families kept (Vuktilaj M., 2018). With so much work to do, spinning could be performed at the same time as other tasks by the use of this tool, such as carrying water from a spring back to the home (Young, 2000).

Women in an extended family would alternate chores, while also caring for the elderly in the large family (Vullnetari & King, 2016), and carrying out labor such as cutting wood or farmwork (Post, 1988), depending on seasonal needs. Much of this work was carried out around

the home, leaving women little opportunity to venture from the house. Men, meanwhile, would perform work in agriculture and livestock keeping, leaving the home and working elsewhere. A male head of the household provided leadership to all members of the family. His responsibilities would include making decisions regarding



An example of a *forku* carved with personal symbols.



purchases for the family and arranging marriages (Young, 2000).

All men in a family were a part of decisions the male head made regarding the family, yet women were allowed no involvement. The women would not even be aware of what decisions were being made until a verdict had been met (Backer, 1979). To ensure the requests of the head were met in an orderly fashion, a household had a 'mistress of the house,' a woman that would ensure other women worked to meet male demands (Young, 2000).

The family was central to everyday life. Its organization and control over members of a family remained long unaffected by influence or rules from institutions of religion or law. Its value was seen in its large size (Mitterauer, 1996). Family households were highly patriarchal, with women even washing men's feet (Vullnetari & King, 2016). The Kanun of Lekë, a traditional code of laws dating back to the 15th century, described women as "a sack made to endure as long as she lives in her husband's house" (Gjeçov, 1989, p. 40). The Kanun allows domestic violence as a form of punishment against women, yet alongside limiting her rights, it also commands that a woman is respected and cared for (Gjeçov, 1989).

“

I worked only a short time because my parents arranged a marriage for me. I was engaged and married quickly, knowing nothing of my husband or his family. It was worse than I expected it to be and I have had to face all kinds of hardships alone ... Although my husband has treated me badly, I couldn't consider divorce because of the social consequences I would suffer. I don't feel that I am unusual because most of the Albanian women are under the dictatorship of their husbands”

(Post, 1998, p. 143).



Lule's son's home in Shllak

Women could not inherit property and were mostly uneducated, with 90% being illiterate in the 1930's (Vullnetari & King, 2016). Sons were preferred to continue the family's bloodline, while daughters were the possession of their father. They would not "interfere in her affairs, but they bear the responsibility for her and must answer for anything dishonorable that she does" (Gjeçov, 1989, p. 38).

Upon marriage, 'possession' of the daughter was passed onto her husband (Vullnetari & King, 2016). Mothers were said to be glad at this occasion, feeling a duty fulfilled (Vullnetari & King, 2012). At the same time, though, they would also be losing a relationship that may bring them "great comfort," as mothers would develop a strong bond with their children, having reared them from a young age (Young, 2000, p. 31). Village structure followed this patriarchal trend as well. The male heads of households would enjoy certain privileges of comfort, meeting to represent their families. With households grouped together as isolated villages governed by the Kanun, only men had the ability become a village-chief (Young, 2000).



Age's sister-in-law on her wedding day





During the 1960's, a cultural revolution led by the communist party drastically changed the social landscape of Albania. Inspired by the work of Mao, Enver Hoxha initiated a cultural and ideological purge that dismantled aspects of traditional Albania. Many drastic changes were introduced which affected women in northern Albania: removing government organizations, transforming the country into an atheist nation, and censoring writers and artists, throwing Albania into a further state of isolation from neighboring countries (Library of Congress, 1992).

The traditional large families of the north, with their ability to exist autonomously of the state, were pressured to split. This pressure was partially applied through land confiscation. Agricultural land and livestock were redistributed, with no compensation to the families these resources were taken from. The regime stated that these families, with their patriarchal organization, were hampering social progress (Vullnetari & King, 2016). Women's equality and empowerment were an aim of the communist party (Fullani, 2000).

As individual farms had been seized by the regime (Library of Congress, 1992), and work quotas enforced on the farmers, women worked the fields with men (A. Berhami, 2018). The participation of women in collectivization was viewed as part of the emancipation of women by the communist party (Occhipinti, 1996). Beyond this, women's subordination, and traditions such as arranged marriages, were targeted by the regime as outdated (Doja, 2014).

To further these goals, schools were reformed, and literacy rates among women rose to around 90% by 1989 (Vullnetari and King, 2016). Yet, despite the efforts of the communist party to promote equality between genders, traditional family roles proved difficult to alter. While women gained new freedoms in terms of their jobs were given to women on top of their household duties. In northern communities, the traditional chores remained. (Vullnetari & King, 2012).

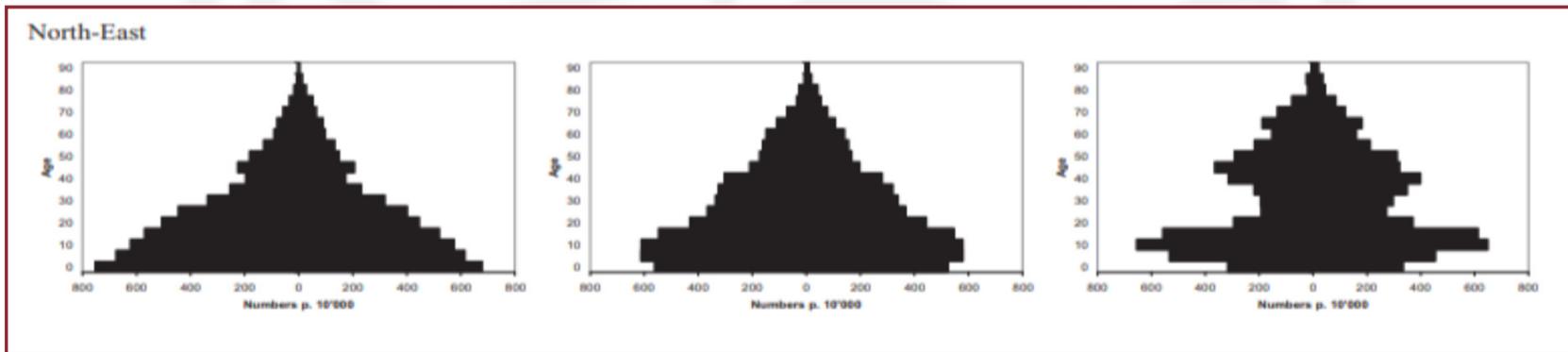
In 1976, the constitution in Albania guaranteed women equal rights to men "in work, pay, holidays, social security, education, in all socio-political activity, as well as in the family" (Library of Congress, 1992, p. 79). Just before end of the communist era in Albania, women made up almost half of the country's students and 47 percent of the workforce (Library of Congress, 1992). Within the home, though, "the roots of patriarchy in the private sphere were not fundamentally shaken," especially in rural areas, and domestic violence was not frowned upon within households, being seen as "normal, as a means of education and a form of communication within the family" (Vullnetari & King, 2012, p. 172).

When communism fell in the 1990's, many young people migrated to urban areas and other countries. For those that remained, an interest in a 'modern' lifestyle grew, disrupting traditional social structures (Vullnetari & King, 2016). This migration was initially led by men, with women following soon after (Vullnetari & King, 2016). Women, though, led decisions regarding their own migration destination. Post-migration, women experienced emancipation through paid employment,



social networks, as well as “through daughters and by changing their appearance, achieving varying degrees of personal and social prosperity” (Bailey, Çaro & van Wissen, 2011, p. 1). Young women that left behind were often called upon to fill traditional gender roles in caring for elderly family members that did

not migrate (Vullnetari & King, 2012). Employment and education opportunities for women were sometimes closed off, with parts of society acting in a reactionary manner, desiring to return to ‘traditional’ societal norms. (Vullnetari & King, 2012).

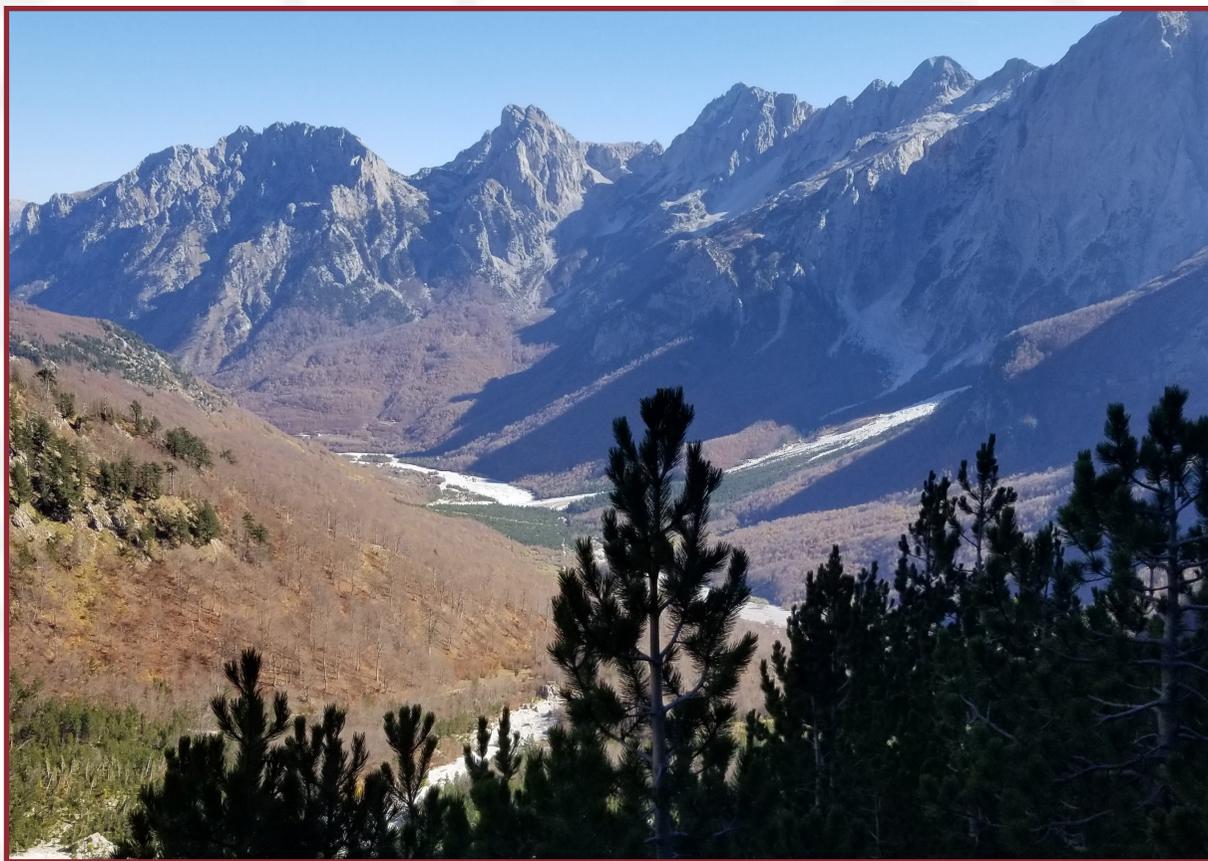


Population Changes of Northern Albania, showing male population on the left halves and female population on the right halves of each graph for (from left to right) 1989, 2001, and 2008–9. After the fall of communism, there was large scale migration from villages of the north to more urban areas, as well as foreign countries. Much of these migrants were younger adults. (Nurja et al., 2010, p. 33)





The xhubleta is a traditional, bell shaped skirt with strong historical ties in northern Albania, as well as parts of Kosovo and Montenegro. The oldest representation of a xhubleta is a terracotta figure found in Klicevac, Serbia, along with other terracottas originating from Mycenae and Crete (Belkaid, 2013). The figures date back to the Bronze Age, around the second millennium BC (Juka, 2018). It appears to wear a dress with the same bell shape as the xhubleta, but scholars debate whether the figurine of Klicevac is truly an older version of the dress. Franz Nopcsa studied traditional costume in northern Albania with a special focus on the xhubleta. He writes that the terracottas from Serbia correspond directly with the form of the skirt found in the xhubleta (Gjergji, 2004). Several scholars, such as Rrok Zoji, Haberlandt, and Garasanin, accept the writing of Franz. One critic, Vojislav Trbuhovic, claims that the links between the figurine and the xhubleta are not present. He cites the inclusion of an apron and other symbols, along with a varied color palette that are not seen in xhubleta from the Kastrati and Kelmendi regions. However, Trbuhovic's arguments are not accepted by all, as he has not acquainted himself with the costumes of the highlanders (Gjergji, 2004).



It is likely that the xhubleta was taken from the coastal locations along the Mediterranean into the small mountain villages in northern Albania (Gjergji, 2004). This is supported by some symbols seen on the xhubleta, such as the crab. This migration was likely caused by a need for protection, as barbarians and other groups attacked settlements on the coast. The people

An example of mountains the people fled to for protection, Theth



retreated into the mountains, where the natural barriers could deter would-be attackers (Juka, 2018). The movement to this new region prompted certain stylistic changes to be made to the dress. A necessity was the addition of heavy outer layers. These layers helped the people to weather the colder climate in the mountains (Gjergji, 2004).

Other stylistic changes of the xhubleta could be explained by this migration.



In early times, the xhubleta was known for its rich collection of colors. One author described the dress as having more colors than a peacock (Gjergji, 2004). However, as the people moved further into the mountains, they did not have the same materials around them. To adapt to the new location, the dresses developed a muted color scheme that transitioned to a black skirt. A different explanation of this alteration in design is the death of



File's xhubleta, inherited from her mother and grandmother

Gjergj Kastrioti, or Skanderbeg. After the death of Skanderbeg, Albania's national hero, in 1468, the intense mourning of the people may have prompted the dark coloration of the xhubleta (Dukgilaj, 2018).

When the Ottoman Empire took control of Albania, their influence spread throughout country. The migration into the mountains afforded the highlanders more protection from the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans found it near impossible to collect taxes from certain areas of the north, due to the rough terrain and the ferocity of the villagers. Some of these mountainous communities were able to successfully defend their independence from the Ottomans (Library of Congress, 1992). Areas

outside of the mountains experienced a greater influence from the empire. This influence was even transmitted through clothing. Some traditional costumes underwent stylistic changes, including making a traditional hat red for a period of time, to match the Ottoman style (Juka, 2018). Since the xhubleta resided in the northern mountains, it was able to better preserve its identity. However, some regions did alter their designs to some degree based on the limited outside influence (Juka, 2018).

In older generations, the xhubleta was the common dress worn by women in their daily lives (Dukgilaj, 2018). The dress held a special significance for the communities in which it is worn, but the women had a direct connection to the xhubleta (Shkurtaj, 2018). All knowledge surrounding the xhubleta was passed down from mother to daughter for generations of women (Shkurtaj, 2018). Traditionally, a woman prepared xhubleta until her wedding day that she would wear into her new life as a married woman (Dukgilaj, 2018). Throughout her life the xhubleta became an extension of the woman. Using symbols and motifs it shared her story to all those that saw the dress (Kadriu, 2010).



Beaded designs on a xhubleta at the University of Tirana

When the woman passed away and her story came to an end, she would be buried in her most beautiful xhubleta. As a result, many of the greatest works of art are lost to the earth (Dukgilaj, 2018).



The xhubleta is a complex dress that is mostly known for the beauty of the skirt, but is made up of a variety of intricate components. Women crafted their xhubleta with the help and guidance of their mothers, learning to make the xhubleta at a young age. They would begin in childhood and continue to make them throughout their lives. Women created each piece themselves, decorating each with beading and embroidery. The symbols sewn into the xhubleta were dependent on the woman, each choosing motifs and designs they felt expressed themselves. Many of these represented the beauty they noticed in nature around them. Although they were able to choose many of the designs on their dress, there are some symbols that were commonly used and expected on each piece of the xhubleta.

The city of Shkoder was a center of trade for the rural communities of northern Albania. Under Ottoman rule, artisans here produced products such as arms, silk, and silver. Traders from the Balkans convened, and by the mid 1800s, structure had built up around this economy to include courts and administrative bodies for trade (Knowlton, 2004). Families from northern villages would travel to Shkoder to trade and acquire goods they could not produce themselves (F. Nika, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018). This included decorative pieces such as beading, ornamentation, and coins that could not be produced by the family.

“*Where the beads from, local or traded? These beads that decorate the postova, where were they taken?*”

“They bought it, bought it in stores in that time... Are they from Albania or abroad?...I don't know, they bought it in Shkodra and brought them here, look how they used it. Beads are bought in a shop in Shkoder even in that time [300 years ago]”

File Nika, 2018



Above is a xhubleta pulled into its parts. In the following pages, each will be discussed in detail from the ground up.



Front view of the socks of an original xhubleta on display in the Shkoder Historical Museum

The çorapet's shape in some ways resembles a modern day boot. It is split into two parts: the kallcet and the sock. The kallcet is made of felt and cow skin leather and covers the women's calf (Nini, 2013). It is made to fit the woman's calf like a mold because the material lacks elasticity (Dukginaj, 2018). Hooks or buttons are found on the inner side of the kallcet. The sock is a knitted piece attached to the kallcet that covers the foot. This wool thread is looser than spik to allow for movement of the ankle and foot (Dukginaj, 2018). The outer side of the çorapet is often decorated with snakes believed to protect the wearer and ward off the "evil eye" (Dukginaj, 2018). The evil eye is a folk belief that due to a limited amount of good in the world, a stranger's envious gaze or stare (the evil eye) would cause withering away, disease, or destruction or property. Snakes were seen as one means of protection from the evil eye eye: rubbing children with snake skin, or an amulet with a dried snake's head were means of prevention of harm from this curse (Albanian



Side view of the fastening mechanisms of the kallcet and the sock. Taken at Tradita Restaurant and Hotel

House Dolls and the Evil Eye, 2006). The snakes are placed strategically by a woman's feet and legs as it is the only part of the lower body not covered by the skirt, which was considered to be the most attractive part of the woman's body to men. The symbol of snakes protected the woman's body from the evil eye and the gaze of men (Dukginaj, 2018).







Below: A closer look at the above xhubleta, a hole from wear displaying the detailed weaving of the xhubleta



Above: A 200 year old skirt inherited by a woman, File, in Shllak.

The largest and most complex component of the xhubleta is the skirt. Like most of the dress, it is made entirely of wool. The skirt is made with many different layers of spiku and felt (Nini, 2018). The spiku is the name for a special type of thread made from a complex braid of sixteen separate strands of wool (Vuktilaj M., 2018). The felt is made by layering combed wool together, while pressing and soaking it to tighten the fibers (Shkurta, 2018). It is alternating layers of these materials that give the skirt enough stiffness to hold its form, but the flexibility for movement. A diagonal, rather than straight, sewing technique gives the skirt its bell shape and allows a graceful wavelike movement of the garment (Dukgilaj, 2018).

Some of the felt strips had a row of symbols embroidered onto them. The number of rows of symbols was an indicator of social standing and wealth, with more beading showing a higher status (DRKK, 2018). These symbols are only visible in the back of the skirt when worn, as it was not covered by other components of the dress. Many of the symbols themselves do not vary much over time due to their origins in nature. However, no piece was identical to another, as they were carefully embroidered with chosen symbols (Vuktilaj M., 2018).



Placed on top of the skirt is the apron, or pështjellaku. Similar to the skirt, it is made completely from wool and is adorned with complex symbols and patterns mostly chosen by the maker to fit her tastes (Shkurtaç, 2018). A pattern of vertical lines and diamonds in the front and center of the top of the apron is often seen, especially on the xhubleta of pregnant women. This pattern is based on feminine anatomy and represents fertility (Juka, 2018). It is also thought to protect the woman's womb, and any child she is carrying, from harm (Dukgilaj, 2018).

A vibrant and well preserved apron. Taken at Tradita Restaurant and Hotel



Left: A close-up of the pattern that represent fertility. Taken at Tradita Restaurant and Hotel

Below: The patterning on another apron that makes use of gold thread and the distinctive fertility pattern. Taken at Tradita Restaurant and Hotel





Below: An example of a heavily beaded postava. Taken at Tradita Restaurant and Hotel



Above: The postava inherited by File, a woman in Shllak, from her mother

The belt, or postava, lays along the ribs and stomach of the woman and wraps all the way around her body. The belt is made from wool with embroidered or beaded patterns, attached in the back by an often intricate metal clasp. The patterns and symbols on the belt are different from those found on the skirt or the pështjellaku. These patterns could be used solely as decoration (Nika, 2018), or they may be more abstract symbols representing one's life. The latter often depict the birth of the women, her pregnancy, the birth of her children, and her death (A. Berhami, 2018). Once a woman becomes pregnant, she wears a different belt with a specific pattern (Dukgilaj, 2018). This pattern is similar to the vertical stripes of fertility often seen on the apron. The pattern is simple, colorful stripes with no other shapes, meant to protect the baby in the womb (Juka, 2018).



The Shirt

The përparje is the piece of the xhubleta that covers the woman's chest. While the rest of the xhubleta is made from thick wool, the shirt piece is crafted out of felt. and is much softer than the other parts of the dress (Nini, 2013). This material allows the breast to take its natural shape (Dukginaj, 2018). The ornamentation on this part of the xhubleta varies greatly from woman to woman, as metalwork and filigree are added depending on the family's wealth (Shkurtaj, 2018).



A shirt with many Pagan symbols.
Picture taken in Vermosh

The jacket, also known as the kraholi, is worn to attract the attention of the men. This is unlike the other parts of the xhubleta which are meant to protect the women from the men's gaze. Like many other pieces, the jacket is made of heavily embroidered wool. However, since it is built to stand out against the other pieces, more colorful dyes are often used. The dyed wool, combined with fringe on the sleeves create movement meant to catch the eye (Juka, 2018). Like the belt, the symbols on the kraholi are mostly decorative and reliant on the tastes of the woman who made it (Vuktilaj M., 2018).

The Jacket



A shirt with minimal decoration. Picture taken at Kruja Souvenir



Kraholi from the back



Kraholi from the front



Tallagan from the front

The tallagan is a type of cloak that was worn over the rest of the xhubleta. It too is made completely of wool with some metal work along the shoulders and embroidery on the hood. The tallagan is predominantly found in the colder, mountainous areas of northern Albania (Berhami, 2018). It is only worn during the colder months of the year including the Autumn months when many weddings were held. As a result, the tallagan was often decorated to be worn by the bride on her wedding day. It is the rarest piece of a xhubleta because it was only made and used in certain villages (Berhami, 2018).

Headpiece featuring gold metalwork



The kapica is a half circle head piece. This piece is generally worn by younger women. It is topped with intricate metalwork, mostly using silver, with colorful stones set into it (Dukginaj, 2018). The concave shape allows for easier placement and stability in its place atop the woman's head. Sewn onto the kapica is the veil (Nini, 2013). The veil is often lighter in color and may sometimes be replaced by a thinner strip of heavier, embroidered fabric that resembles a protective snake and lays from the forehead to the back of the head (Dukgilaj, 2018). During pregnancy, women wear these snakelike adornments on both sides of their head, as well as the top to protect her from all directions. With this addition, the woman's body is protected from her head down to the snakes at her feet (Dukgilaj, 2018).





From left to right:

Top:

Headpiece with hanging Turkish coins

Christian religious symbol: cross ornament

Muslim ornament featuring Turkish coin

Bottom:

Necklace adorned with Turkish coins

Half moon amulet gifted to mother for newly born daughter

Most ornaments contain images that resemble suns, moons, stars, eagles, or other natural and cultural symbols. These are relics of Paganism, which dates back to the initial creation of the xhubleta. Amulets of these symbols were believed to catch evil spirits, protecting the women. As other religions were introduced to the region, the jewelry became influenced by a mix of Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox and Islamic religions (Belkaid, 2013). The most visible differences can be seen between the xhubleta that are influenced by Christianity and Islam. Commonly there are differences in the types of coins and symbols used in the jewelry. The Christian xhubleta make use of Austrian coins and crosses, whereas the Muslim xhubleta bear Turkish coins and crescents (Berhami, 2018).

Jewelry is found on many different parts of the body. All together, it would hang from the xhubleta, making noise as the women approached. The noise was said to warn people and animals to move



Talismen that would be filled with coins



Amulet that was used to secure the postava from behind

out of the woman's way (Juka, 2018). There is often a chain that hangs from the postava, adorned with coins and charms that are given to the woman upon the birth of a child (Vuktilaj M., 2018). These charms are silver, with coins integrated into their design. Along with this chain, a small pair of bronze or brass tongs for picking up embers hangs at the waist (Vuktilaj M., 2018). During her wedding, a woman would be given gold or silver coins. She would accept these and place them in a talisman, a triangular ornament worn as a necklace (D. Vaçoj, personal communication, Nov. 28th, 2018). This is also decorated to ward off the evil eye (Dukginaj, 2018).





The symbols traditionally worked into xhubleta have developed through the experiences of women for centuries. These women built a form of woolen armor adorned with snakes to protect themselves from the gaze of men, but at the same time eye catching bright colors and stuffed backs of their skirts were present, too. The contradictions found in and around the xhubleta are reflections of those same disparities in the lives of women in northern Albania, creating an avenue to delve into these conflicting practices.

A woman's place in a patriarchal system was not only seen in her role of making her xhubleta, but also in the wearing of it. Clothing serves as a constant reminder to the wearer of the behavior expected of them, and at the same time it cues others to how the wearer can and should be treated (Kuper, 1973). When young girls were introduced to the xhubleta, they were held to a higher standard. Their parents would see them differently, respecting them more, but also expecting a new level of maturity (A. Vuktilaj, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2018). The first time Lule Sokoli wore her xhubleta she was told,



Lule Sokoli

“

You have to walk in such a way to show that you were a strong woman, a real woman from Malesia e Madhe”

Lule Sokoli, 2018

The xhubleta was directly tied with expectations for how a woman was required to act, and a woman's behavior on her wedding day highlighted her place in the family. At weddings, brides were not permitted to look others in the eye. They had to direct their gaze downwards and could not turn their backs on any of their guests as a sign of respect (Shkurtaj, 2018). They were not allowed to speak unless prompted to, while being delivered to their husbands home. This continued even for a period after the wedding day (Lane, 1922).

Ornamentation on the dress was another way the xhubleta characterized a woman's place in society. She was expected to be loyal to her husband and his family. To remind the woman of the role she played for her husband, tongs were placed on the woman's belt. These tongs were used to grab a embers from the fire (Juka, 2018) in order to light her husbands cigarette (Berhami, 2018). The woman was not allowed to light the tobacco of any man other than her husband. Hospitality was important, but so was loyalty to one's husband (Berhami, 2018, Young, 2000).

Lule was born in Tamal in 1935. She was married in Shllak and has lived in her home that she shares with her son and his wife for 66 years. Their traditional stone home is nestled in the mountains, just downhill from a large field. There they cultivate the fields and raise pigs, chicken, and turkey in addition to keeping bees.

The first time Lule donned a xhubleta was on her wedding day. Her mother worked for a year to build her intricate wedding costume. As was tradition, Lule wore the xhubleta for outings and special occasions for the year following her wedding.





The intense weight and rigid construction of the xhubleta restricted the wearer's movements. The dress itself weighed up to fifteen kilograms, but further decoration added to the burden of the woman. On some costumes, a metal ornament was attached to the jacket. This ornament was shaped like a bullet, digging into the chest of the woman when she moved. This abrasion was meant to remind the woman of the punishment she would receive if she betrayed her husband's family (Berhami, 2018). In some areas, on her wedding day, a woman's family would give her future husband a bullet. The bullet was meant to kill the young woman if she ever dishonored her new family through adultery or lack of hospitality (Young, 2000).

The xhubleta is often regarded as having an impressive form. It has been described as a "sculpture, not a dress" (Hamza, 2018) with a flowing 'tail' as the woman walks. Men were expected to not show any outward desires for women, and romance and love were not intertwined with marriage (Young, 2000). Yet, for some women, pillows would be placed under the dress in order to accentuate their figure and the form of the xhubleta (Dukgijaj, 2018). This control over women's physical form through dress speaks to the patriarchal control and servitude women endured. At the same time, women spoke about how the impressive size commanded respect, as one woman put it, "to wear a xhubleta makes you feel like a real respected woman" (P. Noja, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).



A photo highlighting the shape of the skirt

“ I felt wider (laughs), but I was delighted and respected.”

Lule Sokoli, 2018





Pashkë Noja

Pashkë is an 80 year old woman, born in the village of Vukaj. She has lived in Bordaj for the past 62 years. She visits her daughter, Lule, in Shllak often. The first time Pashkë wore a xhubleta was for her wedding; her father bought the dress specifically for the occasion. She continued to wear her xhubleta for special occasions and visits for two years after she was married. She only stopped wearing it once her children were born.

Pashkë still has her xhubleta and refuses to sell, unless sold as a whole. Keeping with tradition, Pashkë's daughter, Lule, also wore a xhubleta for her wedding. She wanted the best for her daughter, so she gathered the components of a xhubleta from Malesi e Madhe for Lule's ceremony.

In old Albanian tradition, marriages would often be arranged (Berhami, 2018). This practice continued in some families into the 1990s in northern Albania. A husband and bride were often from separate villages, ensuring they had not met before their wedding day. Arranging marriages was also used as a token of friendship between families (Young, 2000) and pairings were frequently made when sons and daughters were children. Lule's marriage was arranged when she was young.

“

My father arranged my engagement for me when I was three years old, and I had not seen my husband until the wedding day. My father died while I was engaged and he did not see my marriage.”

Lule Sokoli, 2018

Some of these practices continued into communist Albania, before the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Lule's son's mother-in-law, **Pashkë Noja** was married in her xhubleta in the mid-1950s. Like Lule, this was the first time that she had ever worn a xhubleta. She was neither given a xhubleta at a young age nor did she inherit a one from her mother. Her father purchased a xhubleta specifically for her wedding. Lule married around the same time as Pashkë and remembers feeling powerful when she put the xhubleta on; she was very happy to be able to wear the dress her mother made for her wedding (P. Noja, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).

“

No one looked more beautiful than us that day”
[referring to herself and Pashkë on their wedding days]

Lule Sokoli, 2018



Pashkë's wedding lasted for four days. The first day was spent with her father's family. This day of the celebration was a bittersweet occasion. Pashkë was leaving her family and the only life she'd ever known to join her husband and his relatives. In some cases, when the woman was taken from her father's home, there was a "ritual sobbing", signifying the woman's loss of her old identity (Young, 2000). She was to shed her role in her childhood home and don a new one as the nuse (new bride) of her husband's family. The following three days were a much livelier occasion. The festivities included the entire village and her husband's many relatives who came to celebrate their marriage. For three days, the guests danced with one another, celebrating the wedding (P. Noja, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).

“ I felt very good, very beautiful. There were already 200 people, all looking happy. My husband was the only son of his family, and we had three days of celebrations, dancing and singing.”

Pashkë Noja, 2018

The celebration was focused on the link between the families rather than the bond between bride and groom (Young, 2000). The bride was not able to enjoy the festivities of the wedding. Pashkë stood in her xhubleta, eyes directed towards the floor. She stood with her father-in-law and mother-in-law the entire time, while others enjoyed themselves (P. Noja, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).

“ When they sing songs we weep, because in their songs they mentioned my mother and my dad, and the bride does not dance. She stood between her father-in-law and mother-in-law during all the time in one place at her feet. I did not have to move almost at all, even if I felt tired from standing on my feet, I should not even move my head, even if something fell out of my hand, someone who was sitting beside me would pick it up for me.”

Pashkë Noja, 2018

After the wedding, the bride moved into the home of her new husband and his family. From then on, the woman was referred to by her husband's name; she was seen as a possession of her husband. Over the next month after the marriage, she was expected to wear her best attire for visitors (Young, 2000). Pashkë wore her xhubleta on special occasions, and to church, for one year after her wedding (P. Noja, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018). This was also the case for **Prena**, married in Nderlysaj, near Thethi. She inherited her xhubleta from her mother when she was a young woman. Prena wore the xhubleta on the day of her wedding and for the next year for special events. (P. Anonymous, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2018). This was so that visitors could determine whether the bride was a “worthy new addition to the household” (Young, 2000), another way to show that women held a subservient position to men.





Prena

When asked about their xhubleta, women often mention their mother. The dress has an inherent maternal emphasis, reinforced over thousands of years. Throughout history, the mother was the primary teacher for young women regarding the construction of the xhubleta.

“

This is from my mother and this from my grandmother. The skirt from my grandmother, the postova from my mother.”

“Did you made it, who made it? Who made the xhubleta, did your grandmother made it herself?”

“My mother did this and my grandmother this one. They did it themselves.”

File Nika, 2018

Pran currently lives in the small village of Nderlysaj lies a short way down the valley from Theth, where she and her son run a guesthouse. Pran inherited her xhubleta from her mother, and wore it for her wedding and 12 months after. When she was 27, her husband passed away. After his passing, Pran did not feel the need to wear the dress anymore. Instead, she stored the dress away in a duffle bag within her home.

File Nika's story exemplifies the importance of a maternal figure. When she was only six years old, her mother passed away while giving birth to her sister. Traditionally, this would not have affected a girl's learning of the xhubleta. “When you didn't have a mother, then other relatives took the role of teaching the girls how to produce xhubleta. Such as aunt, it was always a member of the family that had big influence on the girl” (Shkurta, 2018).

File did not have this family member to help teach her about the xhubleta. She inherited pieces of the 300 year old xhubleta owned by her mother and grandmother. Without either of them around she never learned to make them for herself, or what the patterns on it expressed. File does not recall ever seeing anyone wear a xhubleta, and has never worn one herself. (F. Nika, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2018).





File Nika

“*What do the patterns mean? What does this mean [pointing to patterns]. You said your grandmother did it. Any special meaning?*”

“No. Just the flowers are used by painters for their paintings, and they also used flowers. Flowers from painters.”

File Nika, 2018

Prena was another woman that inherited her xhubleta from her mother. She wore the xhubleta from her mother on her wedding day and for several years after. However, Prena has not taken care of her dress.

File lives in the mountains of Shllak, in the same home where she was born. Her house itself is isolated, difficult to access even by offroad vehicle. Growing up, her mother died giving birth to her sister when she was six years old. Although left without a mother figure, File inherited her xhubleta from her. She has never worn it, and doesn't recall xhubletas being worn in her lifetime. She feels xhubleta should be kept in a place where they can be protected and preserved.

“*It is not in good shape. The xhubleta is not in good shape because [I] was not very lucky in my life because [my] husband died when [I] was 27, and [I] didn't care anymore about the xhubleta to wear it afterwards*”

Prena, 2018

She stored the xhubleta in a gym bag, out of sight. This disruption in her life affected her daughter as well. Since Prena lost attraction for the dress, she did not pass on the knowledge of the dress to her daughter. Instead, her daughter wore a white dress instead of the xhubleta on her wedding, ending a tradition that stretched back generations (P. Anonymous, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2018).

Age Vuktilaj had a much different upbringing than both File and Prena. She had a much closer relationship to her mother, especially in crafting the xhubleta. As a very young girl Age recalls her mother preparing her to make her first xhubleta.



Age Vuktilaj

“

I was seven years old, and my mother said to me ‘You are no longer a child.’

‘What am I now, mother?’

‘Now we have to see you as a girl, having respect for the elderly, to be humble, to talk less.’ So it was time then. Showing that now I have authority, for what I was wearing.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018

For Age, receiving her first xhubleta was a landmark in her life. On the first time she wore a xhubleta, she said “For me it felt like I was growing up” (A. Vuktilaj, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2018).

Age Vuktilaj, born in Koplik, currently lives with her son and daughter in law at a guest house that they run in Vermosh, near the border of Montenegro. Her daughter-in-law, Marjana Vuktilaj, keeps a small gallery of xhubleta upstairs.

Age began wearing the xhubleta in her everyday life at age seven, under the direction of her mother. She created her own xhubleta, yet well into her married life Age chose to stop wearing her them and adopt more practical clothing instead.

“

When I was seven I wore it for the first time, because that was the tradition and that was what I was supposed to wear.”

“And how did you feel, did it seem normal to you?”

“Yes, it was normal for people from the mountains.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018

Receiving her first xhubleta prepared Age for her transition from childhood to girlhood. From that day onward, Age wore her xhubleta every day. This was normal for northern Albanian girls (Dukgilaj, 2018). She had two white and black striped xhubleta, one for her day to day activities and another for special occasions, such as going to church or the bazaar. The costumes that the girls wore did not include the ornamentation that the older women had (Vuktilaj M., 2018).



In some areas it was seen as strange to not wear the xhubleta. “If they would wear something else, like a loose costume, they would mock her.” (D. Vaçoj, personal communication, Nov. 28th, 2018) As girls progressed toward womanhood and marriage, they began to construct their own xhubleta. Age started to create her own xhubleta at the age of nine with the assistance of her mother, who especially helped her embroider the intricate designs into her finer xhubleta (A. Vuktilaj, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2018). This maternal connection with the xhubleta extended to care of the garment, too.

“

I was 9 years old when I started to wash my xhubleta, because my mother had no other female at home, and we had to do all the housework together, and she taught me how to wash my xhubleta. It takes very little water to wash the xhubleta, because water can release the dye from the black part, and the white part can't be dirty. And when it had to dry the white part always had to be hung up and the black part always had to be laid down. And as my mom said, I did. Often we had to separate the white part from the black part, to wash them separately so as not to injure the xhubleta, and then we sewed it again.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018

The process of making the dress was very long and time consuming. Women recalled that it could take between two months (T. Bordaj, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018) and a year (L. Sokoli, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018) to craft a single xhubleta.

“

We had a lot of time and we had a big house with livestock and we worked a lot. It would take 3 weeks. 3 weeks to sew.”

“How long did it take to make the whole thing?”

“It took a long time, it was a lot of work. We worked slowly.”

“How long did the process take, to do the whole thing?”

“It would take about 2 months.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018



Wool spun using a forku



A close up of the joined pieces of the skirt







Under the reign of Enver Hoxha, Albania was transformed into an Atheist state. Religious symbols were included in the disruptive values targeted by the communist regime. The xhubleta Age began crafting at such a young age were meant for her married life. These xhubleta were different from the ones that she wore as a child. Instead of a pattern of black and white stripes, the base color of the new xhubleta was almost completely black. The black xhubleta that Age wore signified that she was a married woman.

It was traditional for women to build a number of xhubleta for their life beyond girlhood (Dukgilaj, 2018). Some women produced three, while others crafted up to nine (Dukgilaj, 2018). Age created five xhubleta for her wedding day. She worked on these dresses for nine years, from the age of nine until she turned eighteen (Vuktilaj A., 2018). These xhubleta were not to be worn until the day of her marriage. If a woman owned multiple xhubleta, she would be married in her most beautiful dress (Nini, 2013). On a woman's wedding day, all these xhubleta would be sent with the bride and her belongings to her husband's home (Nini, 2013).

“On my wedding day I wore the most beautiful [xhubleta] that I had.”
Age Vuktilaj, 2018

The dresses were not entirely black. A thin white stripe may be present on the bottom edge of the skirt (Dukgilaj, 2018), along with different decorations, details, and symbols (Vuktilaj A., personal communication, Nov. 12th, 2018). As the creator of her own xhubleta, Age had some control over what symbols she placed on them. Age selected classic motifs to display on her xhubleta.

“Did you put any symbols on the xhubleta that you made yourself, did they have a certain meaning? Or did you just put on something that you liked?”

“I put symbols on that I liked.”

“Did they have any meaning?”

“No, I took the ones that I liked.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018

These symbols were part of a woman's external appearance, which may be deliberately altered to reflect her tastes, or purposely adapted to reflect her individual identity (Kuper, 1973). Age's choice in symbols appeared to reflect her personal taste. Many women chose to adorn their xhubleta in symbols reflecting their daily routines and the nature that is such an important part of their lives on a daily basis (Berhami, 2018). Some women's choice of symbols may have even been restricted, and may not have been forms of individual creativity - “If you ask any of the women who've worked on these about why they used a particular design they would answer ‘kështu bëhet’ - ‘that's the way it's done.’” (Gowing, 2017 p. 119).

“
Any characteristic symbol in the xhubleta, do you remember?”

“I do not know, some flowers, some eagles, someone else had embroidered a name, everyone has had different things, some had zigzag lines.”

Tonine Boloj, 2018



Intricate beadwork form a wealthier family

In addition to the decoration of the skirt, pieces were added to the xhubleta to show important moments in a woman's life. One such ornament was a silver chain attached to the postava that was decorated according to the number of children a woman had. For every child that was born, she added a silver sun or half moon, depending on if the child was a boy or girl respectively (Berhami, 2018). These examples of symbolism on the dress allowed an onlooker to understand fragments of a woman's life solely from the clothes she wore.

Other symbols allowed the women to express their personal status in the community. In many cultures, “clothing is an intimate part of the total status system” and can display this status (Kuper, 1973 p. 349).

“
By looking at the xhubleta could you tell if they were from a wealthy family or not wealthy family?”

“Yes, because there were lesser quality (weaker) materials. The poor had weaker materials. The ones that had nicer houses usually had nicer xhubletas.”

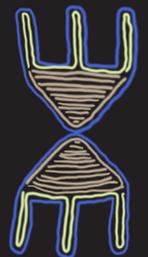
Age Vuktilaj, 2018



Gold threaded embroidery

If a family was in good economic standing, the women would have more xhubleta (Shkurta, 2018). In addition, the amount jewelry present on the xhubleta was an indicator of the family's status - exquisite jewelry and embroidery adorned the xhubleta. Quality was another measure. Wealthy families used a golden filigree to decorate the xhubleta, while poorer families may use an imitation thread because they could not afford the precious metal (Berhami, 2018).

In some cases, this jewelry was given to the bride on the day of her wedding. If the woman were marrying into a wealthy family she would be provided a xhubleta with full accessories in gold (Berhami, 2018). One common type of gift to the bride was a chain of coins from different locations. The socio-economic position and religion of the family influenced the coins found on these tokens.







Tonine Boloj

The xhubleta is not a political garment by design or intended purpose (Skurtaj, 2018). Under the reign of Enver Hoxha, though, Albania was transformed into an atheist state. Under this rule, “tradition posed a serious obstacle to the creation of a desired socialist future” (Doja, 2014, p. 164). The xhubleta, adorned with religiously affiliated symbols, became taboo due to the communist revision of culture.

Despite tradition being seen as an obstacle towards a socialist future, Enver Hoxha's cultural revolution led to tradition being celebrated, but selectively so. To build a nationalist spirit in favor of the party, aspects of culture that aligned with the socialist agenda were promoted, while those that did not were eradicated. The government declared that “social practices and cultural values that were not compatible with communist ideology, ... were to be considered ‘inauthentic,’ ‘alien,’ or ‘disruptive’ to Albanian socialist reality. These practices were to be removed

Tonine's mother and mother in law were artisans who made xhubleta for family members. The two worked to make their own xhubleta, as well as costumes such as the *çakçir* for other members of the family. Tonine herself has only worn the xhubleta for photographs. Feeling pressure from the regime, she did not wear it on her wedding. Tonine passed the xhubleta she inherited from her mother on to her own children.

from the realm of people's culture” (Doja, 2014, p. 165). The use of the xhubleta, especially in the case of ceremonies that had religious ties, like marriage, was discouraged.

However, folk costume was not banned entirely, as shown by the annual folk festival in Gjirokastra. At such events, favorable tradition was carefully framed to not include any “backward’ practices that were prevalent in the areas which had produced them” (Doja, 2014, p. 166). These events were key in spreading Hoxha's ideal socialist vision for Albania.

Tonine Boloj was one of the many women who were denied the opportunity to wear a xhubleta to their weddings under the communist regime.

“

We did not think we should wear the xhubleta anymore, and we wore new outfits. I did not wear the xhubleta on the wedding day either.”

Tonine Boloj, 2018

“No, no one took it from us, my mom had kept it. You were not forced by anyone to not have a xhubleta at home.”

Tonine Boloj, 2018





Zinë Markaj

Not all women were unable to wear the xhubleta for their wedding. **Zinë Markaj**'s husband's family status under the regime afforded her the opportunity to wear her mother's xhubleta at their wedding. Tradition was important to Zinë's family. Because being married in a xhubleta was so rare at this time, crowds of people visited Reç on their wedding day to see Zinë (Z. Markaj, personal communication, Nov. 28, 2018).

Zinë lives in Reç, running a newly opened guesthouse with her husband. Tradition was very important to her family, and her father pushed for her to wear a xhubleta on her wedding day. Because of her husband's education and secure job, she was able to do this despite criticism stemming from the regime. She still finds tradition important, especially traditional clothing. She has made imitation xhubleta and çakçir for her children.

“

I was criticized for her wearing a xhubleta, because it was old tradition. It was against the system. And for my personality, I didn't mind the critics, I accepted for her to wear the xhubleta. But if I wasn't the only one in my profession, and didn't have the education I had, I would be fired. It was discouraged because it was old traditions, it wasn't very ok for the party back then. I was a teacher, I was educated. The only one in that area, so it was tolerated. If it were someone else they may be fired for that. All of these were remainings of the chinese culture that came in the 67. And after the chinese, everyone went for giving up on traditions and the old cultural consequences.”

Mirash [Zinë's Husband], 2018

Harsh penalties were not uncommon at the time. After the regime collapsed, women such as Tonine's sister-in-law were able to be married in a xhubleta without incident (T. Boloj, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).



Under communism, with farms collectivized and new work quotas introduced, it was difficult for women to wear the xhubleta in day to day life, further restricting the dress to festivals. The time devoted to work in collective farms also affected the construction of xhubleta, as there was less time for girls to spend working on their dress and shops were no longer able to supply all of the materials needed (Hamza, 2018). The regime proposed a new style of clothing for female workers. This new dress was much lighter, modeled after Maoist worker clothing (Hamza, 2018), and provided the women more maneuverability and comfort during labor. Tonine explained that the xhubleta “is [a] really heavy garment. It was worn in the past because at that time people did not have options for what to wear, and they had lived with old clothes with handmade clothing from wool” (T. Boloj, personal communication, Nov. 6, 2018).

Women who never wore the xhubleta, such as File, shared that she would not have liked to wear the xhubleta in her day to day life. The dress presented a tremendous physical burden to the wearer; the skirt alone weighed around fifteen kilograms (Dukgilaj, 2018).

“There [is] no time for that now. I didn’t want to. They’re very beautiful, but heavy.”

File Nika, 2018

Another woman called the xhubleta “the heaviest dress, the worst condemnation” (D. Vaçoj, personal communication, Nov. 28, 2018). Some women felt liberated by the removal of the costume from day to day life, while others felt something was missing without it.

“It was enough to wear xhubleta to show that you were a girl from Malesia e Madhe, women of modernity wear clothes that show nothing [about their heritage].”

Lule Sokoli, 2018



Through the cultural revolution, women joined men in the fields

Further disruptions occurred around the xhubleta with the fall of communism in the early 1990s. The closed borders of the country were opened to the world and some women were able to compare their clothing with the outside world.



“
Until when did you wear the xhubleta?”

“I wore the xhubleta daily until about 30 years ago.”

“Why did you stop wearing the xhubleta, why don’t you wear it anymore?”

“I wanted to dress more lightly and comfortably. We had a lot of work to do and it is easier to dress in other clothing.”

“We also saw that the rest of the world wasn’t wearing them.”
Age Vuktilaj, 2018

Albania was joining the rest of European society. This included dramatic changes in culture which led to changes in dress, with western influence and fashion spreading to men and women’s clothing. Large adaptations like this often bring to light conflicts over past identity and beliefs (Arvanitidou, 2011). The quote below highlights this, also spoken by Age.

“
When you didn’t wear the xhubleta anymore and started dressing in modern clothes, how did you feel?”

“We said that with the xhubleta flew away virility (pride) as well. [laughs].”
Age Vuktilaj, 2018





While the xhubleta has survived for so long in northern Albania, the relationship women have with it has changed drastically. As time has passed, traditions and society have evolved, been lost, or forgotten. The xhubleta is no longer worn in everyday life, as it once was. Some families were forced to sell xhubleta in order to support themselves (Z. Markaj, personal communication, Nov. 28, 2018), others adapted to new styles of clothing that became available during and after the communist period (Hamza, 2018). The adaptation to new styles was sometimes forced upon women, while others changed by their own free will (A. Vuktilaj, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2018).

Women in northern Albania have repaired, worn, and cared for their xhubleta during the recent turbulent decades. Women still wear the dress in marriage ceremonies; almost every woman interviewed spoke about the xhubleta as a wedding tradition. Many of the women were keen to have this continue through their own daughters. However, some women do not think it is necessary to keep the dress as a part of day to day life.

“
Nowadays everything has changed, and it is a pity to force a girl to wear a xhubleta. They can wear them in different festivals for excitement or to display them somewhere, as a reminder of previous times. Today’s outfits are the simplest way to keep, dress, and create. But then that was the time. ... Today’s clothes are lighter, simpler. It has been easier for them.”

Age Vuktilaj, 2018

Left: Zinë holding up an imitation xhubleta she knitted for her daughter for a special occasion.

Pashkë’s wish for the tradition to persist has come to fruition. Her daughter, Lule, wore a xhubleta on her wedding day. The pieces of the xhubleta from Malesi e Madhe were gathered from neighbors for Lule’s wedding. Though Pashkë’s is intact, she worked to collect another for her daughter because the xhubleta from Malesi e Madhe are praised as the most beautiful and most heavily ornamented in Albania. Pashkë has kept the xhubleta she wore during her wedding, refusing to sell it off in pieces. Her son is adamant that she not sell it at all.



A close up of a heavily beaded postava



“

I can sell it, but I want to sell it all together. The Jacket ‘paraniku’ with gold ribbons and the ‘velodon’ with gold ribbons edhe ‘shtjellakun.’”

“What if we do not allow you to sell it?” [Son interrupts]

“Why does even your son not want you to sell it, is it important to your family?”

“He just wants those clothes at home, he says if I need money he’ll give me money, if I want modern clothes he’ll buy them for me. We want those clothes for memory and tradition.”

Pashkë Noja, 2018

Lule no longer has the xhubleta that she wore on her wedding day. She has given her daughters some parts of the dress, continuing to pass it down matrilineally, in a way.

“

My mother has embroidered it for me. And when the girls grew up, they liked some pieces in the xhubleta and took some parts of it. Until it was all damaged, and now I do not have it anymore.”

Lule Sokoli, 2018

Other women and their families did not have the opportunity to make this choice. They were forced to sell their dresses in order to support their families financially. In this way, having a xhubleta, especially an original, is a socioeconomic status symbol in itself. Zinë no longer has the xhubleta she was married in. In the aftermath of the communist regime, three years after Zinë's wedding, her mother had to sell it to make ends meet. Though Zinë is disappointed that she doesn't have the xhubleta she was married in, she bought an imitation for herself to display at the guesthouse she and her husband run.



“*What do you miss about having a [original] xhubleta?*”

“All, I see it in my dreams, I dream about it. It was very beautiful.”

Zinë Markaj, 2018

She hopes to keep the tradition of xhubleta and other costumes alive in her family.

“*Does your girl in Austria [referring to her daughter in college there] want to wear the xhubleta?*”

“For that, god, yes I would love that.”

Zinë Markaj, 2018

Zinë has also knitted and imitation of a child's white xhubleta for her daughter to wear at her son's wedding and is sewing other traditional costumes for her grandson's baptism.





Some of the women, especially those that were unable or unwilling to wear the xhubleta suggested that they be preserved by a museum or collector, as they have the tools to care for them properly. However, a number of women forcefully spoke against this idea of taking the xhubleta out of its context. They argued that it couldn't be fully understood or appreciated from behind glass, without a living, breathing woman giving it life.

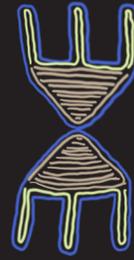
“

There is no better dress in this world. In today's times we do not have any clothes as good as the xhubleta.”

Pashkë Noja, 2018







Currently in northern Albania, the xhubleta is seen as a beautiful traditional dress in ceremonies of dance and marriage. It is no longer commonplace for a woman to make her own xhubleta or inherit one from her mother. Women wear the xhubleta to look their best; these are reproductions of the xhubleta, made with non-traditional techniques and materials, purchased in shops. The dress is seen as an object, unattached to the lives of the wearers. This is very different from the ways the xhubleta was seen in the past, even in recent history. The visibility of the dresses that were crafted for a woman's wedding day or worn in day to day life, full of rips from constant use, and intertwined with social obligations has diminished. The less appealing side of the dress, and the traditions surrounding it, are talked about less often. The xhubleta came from a period of time where women were fiercely oppressed by a patriarchal society.

Historical practices around the dress relate to darker areas of women's lives in northern Albania. Stories of bullet shaped ornaments digging into the flesh, carrying the dress's weight as they stand for two days of their wedding, and the tongs used to express servitude towards their husband exemplify this connection. Yet, women fondly recall the memories that the xhubleta holds for them. Some saw the dress as a personal shield from the hardships that they faced. Others reminisce about the maternal connections that were created when learning to craft the dress. All of the women that were spoken to said that the dress holds an important place in their lives, and the culture of northern Albania. Their personal histories add to the larger conversation about traditional dress in Albania.

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