

An insight into the life of Albanian women in traditional and modern society



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ABSTRACT

The goal of the initial study and this paper is to explore the life of Albanian women in traditional and modern societies. The study contains empiric findings brought by a field research, which the researcher conducted with Albanian women from Kosovo and Albania, who lived in the Czech Republic and Kosovo, between August 2015 and April 2016. The interviews were conducted with a total of 9 respondents, 4 of them being from Albania, three from Kosovo and 2 from the Czech Republic. A part of this research also consisted of participant observation, especially while conducting research regarding Kosovar women.

KEYWORDS

Albanian woman, modern society, Kosovo, Albania, traditional society

To introduce the research, I would like to explain the specifics of working as a field researcher with Albanian respondents. Albanian society, be it in the Czech Republic, Kosovo, or Albania, tends to be closed and to protect its privacy to a large degree. It is therefore challenging to find Albanian respondents willing to cooperate, either women or men. If the researcher is a person that is unknown to the Albanian respondent, is it difficult to secure his trust and openness, which is in many ways the most important factor for the researcher. The researcher often has to find a third party, which has a relationship with both him and the respondent. That being said, not even this always means that the he will be able to obtain information that he needs. The responses of Albanian respondents I registered were often very brief, short or even false — the researcher therefore has to face a difficult task of attempting to tell which responses are honest and which not as much in the given context. It was not possible for me to conduct participant observation in an Albanian family in Kosovo, Albania, be it in a city or in the country — therefore, I concentrated primarily on interviews with Albanian women, who came from Albania or Kosovo to the Czech Republic.

THE CITY AND THE VILLAGE.

ALBANIAN WOMEN FROM ALBANIA OR KOSOVO?

In order to better understand the life of contemporary Albanian women, it seems necessary to firstly differentiate between Albanian women from Albania and those from Kosovo, and also to consider if they come from the countryside or urban environment (the conservative or liberal setting of the family also plays a role). It is also important to take into account the economical standing of the family, education of the parents and also lifestyle of the given family (respectively if the family lives by



certain modern or traditional standards). The reason why I find this important are the historical connotations. After the World War II, in both countries (Kosovo and Albania) a communist régime rose to power — although it stemmed from the same roots in both cases, there were significant differences in the leadership and the style of governance of these respective countries. Both systems played their part and had an impact on the life of Albanian speaking population in many ways, as some of the respondents from Albania also claimed in this research.

This is also connected to another factor, which had an impact on the forming of contemporary Albanian society — that being the modernization of the traditional family model in the Balkans. This happened to a large extent during the second half of the 20th century. The patriarchal Albanian society of that time began to be influenced by improving literacy of the population, possibilities for education, the mandatory military service and other factors. Also, the Albanian extended families also started to fall apart, traditional ways of life started to fade, the population started moving away from villages to cities and the role of women also started to change — they started to play a more significant role in the educational and working processes. Let us mention that there were also exceptions to this, which were not touched by these new trends. These were mostly the northern situated parts of Albania and small villages, be it in Albania or Kosovo. In most cases, these were situated far away from cities and schools and the economic situation there was much worse than in the cities. Regarding the north of Albania, the society living in these parts was still strongly patriarchal and traditional, even during the second half of the 20th century. The people here lived and some also still live while following the traditional ways of life. Either way, talking about Albania, the state wanted to bring a change to this situation in the north of the country and therefore, teachers were sent there from Tirana and also certain larger southern Albanian towns (Koprlová 2016: 100).

It is worth mentioning that respondents (women) from Albania proper refused categorically to be in any way connected to women from Kosovo. Women from Albania, who come from a city or live there, now present themselves as strong, educated, emancipated, independent and working women, who are proud of their Albanian identity and the fact itself that they are women. To a certain extent, they also mention the fact that they are not dependent on their men. These women call themselves “real women”, that being in comparison to those living in the countryside. The barrier between Albanian women coming from the cities and the countryside still exists in both mentioned countries. Although some Albanian women from the cities, both from Albania and Kosovo, who criticized women coming from the countryside and evaluated them negatively, never really visited a village. In comparison, those women who did visit the countryside were not nearly as critical.

I think there is a huge difference in comparison with them. So, to make an article about Albanian women you have to go to Tirana, not to Kosovo...The situation in villages is poor and women depend on their husbands, but that is just a minimal part of the whole society. Tirana is where most people live. So, please, when you speak about Albanian women, the proper sample you can find in Tirana, not in Kosovo or in the countryside (Koprlová 2016: 183).

A woman from the city is more powerful, she can decide for herself, she can what she wants, she has the support of her family. Women in the countryside are not well educated, they miss the school, some of them only did some four years of school (Koprlová 2016: 183).



WEDDINGS

In a traditional Balkans society, the wedding is one of the most important events in life (of not the most important one) — the Albanian society does not constitute an exception. The selection of a partner, the engagement and the preparations for the wedding itself were very important not only in the Slavic societies, but also in the Albanian one, as was also proved by the rules of various versions of *kanun* (the Albanian unwritten customary law).

It used to be typical for the traditional Albanian society that parents were the ones who chose the future partner for their children and Albanian women had no right to influence this process. During my research, I encountered information about a pre-mediated wedding twice, in two forms. The first form was the traditional one, where the wedding was communicated by the parents. I never encountered a situation when the parents of the respondent didn't approve of the wedding. In case of the respondents themselves, none of them had a pre-mediated wedding. They acknowledged that this form of pre-mediated wedding is still being practiced in the countryside. The second time I encountered the pre-mediated wedding in a modern form was when I was told about a case, when the parents preliminarily mutually acquainted their children in hope that they will be interested to form a relationship. Eventually, the children exchanged their contacts on Facebook, communicated and tried to find out if there is a common ground that they can further expand. If the initial impulse came from the parents, it seems that these couples usually stay together and marry — when the relationship becomes a fact that is known by the respective families, the partners start to see the relationship as a serious possibility.

Historically, another way to conclude a marriage was to abduct the bride. The customary law *Kanun* sees this possibility as a legitimate one. Even though such marriages were seen as legitimate until recently, they are very rare in today's Kosovo or Albania (Koprlová 2016: 103). I have registered only one mention of a case of bride abduction from my respondents. The respondent mentioned that this case took place in the 80's in Kosovo.

I got married when I was 15 or 16 years old. It didn't make my parents happy. My groom abducted me from my home, it was on a evening, he called his friends to help him. I told my parents I'm going for a walk, I didn't tell them that I'm going to marry him. He took me to his aunt, where his friend and his family were. He told me there is no other home for me to return to know and that I will be his wife from now on. The thing is that I wasn't of age, so we had to go to the police. They invited my parents there. My father then came with a knife and he wanted to kill my husband. He wasn't thinking clearly, he was furious. They told me if I'm going to return home, or if I want to go with him. But it's embar-



rasing to leave your home in our country, and like this, I'd have to face it. So I stayed with him. My parents didn't talk to me at all for 9 months. Nobody wanted to see me or hear about me. (Koprlová 2013: 68).

Weddings are usually popular events, where young people become acquainted with their peers and they almost exclusively take place during the summer. It is usually a huge event, not only for the bride and groom, but also for their families, and all members of the family usually meet on this occasion — even friends and people, who do not know the family at all. The number of guests can reach 300–400 people — to a great degree, everything depends on the size of the family and on its economical standing. The basic rule of Albanian weddings is that the guests are not invited. Albanians also often get to know each other at work or at school. Many of my respondents met their partners at high school or university.

In both Albania and Kosovo, the age when the marriage took place used to be very low — for both genders, it used to be below 20 years of age, up until the 1970's. From the responses I gathered and statistical information, it seems that this limit is nowadays higher in both countries. Women usually marry between 20 and 28 years of age, although there are exceptions, when this happens significantly earlier. (Koprlová 2016: 104).

It is not as early in our case, because even Albanian women are interested in their careers. In a way, it's a copy of the Italian style. Today's Albanian women are independent — it's not as it used to be, when a woman had one relationship and she had to continue that one with a marriage. Nowadays, if this first relationship fails, it's not a problem to find somebody else. It became more liberal even in Albania. We understand, that if they have a relationship and it doesn't work, it's better for them to split up. (Koprlová, 2016:186).

In the past, bride's apparel was an important part of preparing the wedding itself, and the bride herself also took care of this part (Koprlová 2016: 105). In my research, I observed if this tradition is still alive with young Albanian women and in which form. In older generations, this phenomenon was registered, whereas with the new generation in Kosovo, the apparel is provided by the future husband. Several respondents from Albania told me that in this country, this is not the case. The bride is also given various gifts, such as golden jewelry and money (the latter is usually given by the wedding guests). This tradition is still followed. (Koprlová 2016: 105).

In the Albanian traditional society, the life of newly wed pairs after the wedding used to be largely based on the life of husband's parents. According to the responses of women from both countries, it used to be perfectly common until the end of 20th century, that women's parents and grandparents lived in the house of husband's parents. This patrilocality can still be registered in today's Kosovo (Koprlová 2016: 105–106). My research regarding Kosovo also points out that Albanians tend build spacious houses with several floors, where wide families live together. Eventually, brothers build their houses close to each other. Families often work together to manage their land, women cook together and they care for one another's respective children. Understandably, this is not something that can be generalized — in both Kosovo

and Albania, there are many partnerships nowadays, where the partners start to live together in a new locality immediately after the wedding.



THE MARRIAGE

The standing of Albanian women in marriages is still generally seen as a subordinate one in the Czech society. Many people believe that an Albanian woman has no rights and that she is fully subordinated to her husband, and that she must obey and respect him. This is a belief that I encountered not only with Czechs, but even Albanians. I believe that the reason why this belief still exists is the fact that Albanian society is very exclusive — many people therefore still follow the patriarchal model of marriage between Albanians.

I also attempted to find out if there are problems between the partners and what they usually are. Since none of the respondents reported any potential differences in opinions or critique coming from the husband, a question poses itself if this has to do with certain tabu in the Albanian society regarding the fact that wife should not criticize her husband in front of foreigners or her own family.

DIVORCE

Another topic, which was of interest to me, were divorces. Even though nowadays the divorce rate tends to be very high in many European countries, Albanian society in Albania and Kosovo forms an exception in this sense. According to the statistics that I was able to obtain, the divorce rate in these countries is very low on the contrary (Koprlová 2016: 107). This has also been largely proved by the responses I obtained. Most respondents claimed that they are not aware of any such cases. Those, who knew about such cases claimed that the reason for divorce was adultery, different character traits of the partners or the fact that the partners were not able to reproduce.

WOMEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Another typical characteristic of traditional Albanian society was that women usually worked in the household whole life and she cared for her husband, children and the house. This topic is nowadays a very sensitive and controversial one among Albanian women. Some Albanian women from Albania and Kosovo coming from city environment opposed the standing of Albanian women who stay in the house:

That's not my life style. I like to be an independent woman (Koprlová 2016: 183).

They (the women staying in the household) do not want to invest their time, because it's tiresome to work both outside and at home. I think that a woman who works does the things at home anyway and they do it just as good as a woman that does not have any



other job. These women are not qualified. And the ones that do have it, some even have a university degree, they are lazy — because they never worked and therefore they have no reason to come back to it. They're satisfied with the life they live, where they take care of the household and children. (Koprlová 2016: 191).

According to some respondents, the women working in the household are very conservative and many of them do not have a higher education. These respondents confirm that there are still many such women in the Albanian society, although they state that these are in most cases women from the countryside and from parts of Albania or Kosovo which are poor. What is of importance here is the fact that this is a choice of the women, not something dictated by their husbands. Mostly, I followed the situation in Kosovo:

- It happens, that the village where the family lives is situated too far from a city and is it not worth it for the woman to find a job there. Apart from this, her only opportunity is to work in her husband's shop (if that exists) or to open a business of her own (often a salon, hairdresser's etc).
- The situation on Kosovo's jobs market is a difficult one — there is a large amount of people looing for jobs and on the other hand, only a handful of job openings. The largest percentage of unemployed consists of women. Wages in Kosovo are comparatively very low, which leads to the women rather staying at home.
- Some women encounter difficulties returning to a job after several years spend in the household.

They have lost the time. They stayed at home for children to grow up and then it's difficult to start for them from beginning. Albanian women from Albania are very emancipated. That's the difference between Albanian women from Kosovo and from Albania. During the times of the communist regime, Albanian women had the same position as the men, so they had supposed to be at work. So if they wanted to have money for the whole family they had to work, they couldn't stay at home because they didn't have money for the family. They had to have two salaries. Some mother stayed at home with child six weeks. There was no other way (Koprlová 2016: 176).

In Kosovo, it's clear — there is only very few job possibilities. Considering Czech Republic, here, the women work with their husbands, or, if the husband is employed elsewhere, their self esteem is often not high enough to go out and find a job of their own. For example, they may be unsure about their language capabilities. (Koprlová 2016: 161).

Since we mentioned children, to this also pertains the time that Albanian women dedicate to their maternity leave, and also their opinions and opinions of their husbands on how long they should stay with the children at home. The situation at the time when this study was undertaken showed that women in Albania receive their full daily maternity benefit for half a year after going on maternity leave. After this period, they receive a half of this benefit for another half a year (Koprlová 2016: 110). Albanian women from Albania say that if the women does not decide to stay with

their children in the household permanently (until the children grow up), she usually returns to a job after half a year or a year spent on the maternity leave. These respondents were all living in a city, they had a university degree and at the time of conception, all of them were employed — therefore, they stated that the ideal length of maternity leave for them was half a year or a whole year. Even though several husbands of these respondents were convinced that a mother should stay at home with the children in the long term, their husband respected their decision to return to their respective jobs. I registered the same opinion in case of Albanian women from Albania, who have not children so far. The situation regarding Kosovar Albanians is similar.

In case of Albanian women living in the Czech republic in a mixed marriage (therefore those having a Czech man for a husband), I also tackled the question of the language that their children speak to their mothers. One of my Czech respondents who is married to an Albanian from Kosovo had 2 sons, where both parents spoke to the children both Albanian and Czech. The key factor is the locality where the family resides, which leads to the children speaking Czech more often — while visiting family members in Kosovo, the children speak Albanian.

MANAGING THE HOUSEHOLD

In the past, it used to be common that individual members of a Balkans household divided different roles in between them. The distinction used to be based on gender — work, which was considered to be a woman's job, used to be carried out by the lady of the house, daughters-in-law and single young women. This usually covered cooking, working in the garden or on the field, taking care of the children, various common household tasks and so forth (Koprlová 2016: 113). The role of women in contemporary Albanian households is not differentiated as clearly anymore. In the majority of cases, modern Albanian women are usually employed outside of the household and they are therefore obliged to split their duties in between their job, household and family. Often, the husband or children help with her tasks nowadays. Albanian women, who reside in the countryside usually carry out the household tasks by themselves. According to one of the respondents, working on the field is usually a men's job in today's Kosovo, in contrary to the historical situation. Household tasks are often divided not only in between members of one nuclear family, but also in between members of the wider household, in cases where the individual pairs live together in a common household. Both in Albania and Kosovo, it is still fairly common that newly wed pairs still live together with husband's parents after the wedding. This is either changed after the married pair finds a new locality for living, or the situation remains the same in the long term, depending on the family.

EDUCATION

Up until the 2nd half of the 20th century, the question of women's education in Albania and Kosovo was significantly suppressed in comparison to contemporary situa-





tion. However, there are still distinctions in between these two countries. In Albania, mainly the northern situated regions remained illiterate to a large extent, even during the 2nd half of the 20th century. In Kosovo, the similar situation applied to the countryside as a whole. As educational institutions gradually penetrated the regions and tendencies to suppress the sole role of a wife and mother started to appear more widely, these women also started to strive for higher levels of education. Some of them were largely limited by the financial possibilities of the family and therefore were able to obtain only elementary education (Koprlová 2016: 114). Today, the older generation of Albanian parents sees education as an important element and therefore strives to support their daughters in this aspect. However, there is also another point of view regarding this topic, and that is the opinion of male population — in my research, I also tried to find out if certain men feel uncomfortable when their wife officially achieved a higher level of education than themselves. The responses are varied — approximately half of them stated that Albanian men do perceive this situation as an issue. The other half of respondents stressed that the men actually value if their wife achieved a higher level of education.

EMPLOYMENT

As mentioned before, the situation on the job market in Albania is a difficult one, both in Albania and in Kosovo. Both countries suffer from a relatively high unemployment rate, which motivates them to leave the respective countries and seek employment possibilities outside — most preferred destinations being Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Those emigrating outside of the European continent often leave for the United States of America. Albanian women, who achieved a higher level of education often work in the educational, economic or healthcare sector in, both in Albania and Kosovo. Many Albanian women, who achieved middle level of education, often work as store clerks, with another popular choice of employment being a hairdresser's salon of their own (Koprlová 2016: 115). This somehow correlates with the fact that body culture is something of a great importance to both Albanian males and females. Regarding women who only achieved a basic level of education, these usually stay in the household and take care of the family — in cases where the family owns a store, restaurant or a coffee shop (or a similar establishment), the wife usually helps his husband running it.

None of the respondents coming from Albania to the Czech Republic stated that they encountered problems while looking for a job there. It is a common practice that newcomer Albanians make use of possibilities offered by their family or friends who already established themselves in the country — the newcomers therefore either start working on a position that was suggested to them, or they start working in a business directly owned by the forementioned friends of family living in the Czech Republic. Also, none of the respondents stated that they felt discriminated on the Czech job market. Respondents from Albania usually work in the economy sector and there is also a considerable group that studies at a university and works at the same time.

Kosovar Albanian women being married to a Kosovar man with whom I met stated that they usually stay in the household, eventually, they are helping their husbands in a family business. Since there is a trend in the Czech society (not exclusively) when women pursue their own career instead of starting a new family, I was interested to find out what is the situation amongst Albanian women coming from an urban environment. Albanian respondents from Albania stated that Albanian women living in a city often also pursue this trend, perhaps in an even stronger manner than Czech women comparatively. This goes in line with my experience — such women often give priority to education and career and starting a family is therefore overshadowed indefinitely. The situation regarding Albanian women from Kosovo is similar, although I've observed that this phenomenon is not as widespread, which I attribute to a stronger focus on family matters and cohesion (which also applies for Albanian countryside).



SHORT TERM MOBILITY – SEASONAL VISITS

This is a phenomenon that pertains to Albanian women living abroad, in this case in the Czech Republic. Albanian and mixed Czech-Albanian families living in this country usually visit Kosovo and Albania together once or twice a year — this being during the summer season, generally for two main reasons. First being that the summer season is usually the time when families leave for their vacation, while the second one is that weddings, being an important family event, usually take place during this part of the year. In Kosovo and Albania, the families stay at their relatives' house. In spite of the close family relations, the visiting part of the family is considered guests in this case and usual hospitality exerted towards guests is manifested towards them, meaning that they do not take part in household matters. In case the Czech Albanian women own a property in Kosovo or Albania, their respective families who stay in the country take care of the property, fields etc.

CONCLUSION

Understandably, there are key differences between the life of Albanian women coming from urban environment and those coming from the countryside. Albanians coming from the urban environment in Albania (for example Tirana, being the largest city in the country) are usually noticeably more self-confident and more emancipated than Kosovar Albanian women coming from an urban environment. The same can be also said for Albanians from Albania and Kosovo who live in the Czech Republic — the only handicap being a language barrier. Many such women living in the Czech Republic for many years are not willing to learn the local language, which is something that I attribute to their lack of motivation. As mentioned before, Albanian society tends to be exclusive, many of these women work in a family business, stay in the household or they work in a foreign company, where they usually speak English. Albanian women coming from Albanian and Kosovar cities usually present



themselves as independent women who do not depend on their husbands, although it is hard to determine how relevant this claim is. Either way, many of these women achieve a higher level of education, they work or study, and those being on a maternity leave also often return to their respective jobs afterwards. According to my respondents, the life of Albanian women living in the countryside is in many ways different to life of Czech women in a comparable standing. Such Albanian women from Kosovo and Albania usually do not achieve any higher education, their lifestyle and daily regime is different to women living in cities, which is to a certain extent caused by the fact that women living in the countryside stay in the household much often. It is noteworthy however that according to the respondents, such women decide to stay in the household based on their own decision, not the decision of their husband. This is a fact that, I believe, can shed a new light on the life of Albanian women. Apart from that, Albanian women staying in the household also perceive their role as a regular job.

Admittedly, I also found out that the method of field research I chose was not entirely sufficient for the study's aim. This is because some of the key questions require a verification, which can be acquired by utilizing participant observation (for example, this is closely related to the claim that living in the Czech Republic has not brought much of a change regarding the life of respective respondents).

Although my goal was to shed more light on the life of Albanian women in a traditional and modern society, I believe that there are many more phenomena to explore regarding this matter. A trend affecting various areas globally leads to the life in the countryside being much more similar to life in urban areas. This is however something that has not entirely affected Albanian countryside, since a large scale urbanization did not take place. A stationary research utilizing a larger number of responses over a longer period of time could explore these matters even more thoroughly, perhaps even comparatively in regards to the life of women in other areas in the Balkans.

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