

Aesthetics of Folk Dresses of Southwestern Coastal Area



Cultural and Social Anthropology (Ethnology-Folklore)

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Abstract

Albanians' traditional dresses are a clear reflection of their cultural foundations and further development. They embody the features of the country's relief, climate, and lands. While having suffered too many devastating wars, these areas have been able until the 20th century to provide a clear picture of Epirotes, thus witnessing the great importance they entail. The traditional motifs – mainly geometric patterns – are overriding elements that call for immediate attention for their variety of colors and refined embroidery and design. Various areas of the southern coast feature similar clothing, but the Himara and Vlorë dresses are somewhat different. This difference is more obvious when compared with other areas, which, unlike the southern territories, were unable to preserve their culture with such accurate balance. The main elements of this simple but refined clothing include the fustanella (kilt), doublet, pants, long bloomers, leather moccasins, etc.

Introduction

The Albanian traditional dresses, particularly those of the southern coast, have always been distinguished for their diversity of colors and motifs, in which geometrical patterns prevail. Reaching this harmony required the right fabric and the appropriate nuances of threads. While developing capitalist relations, Albania opened its door to industrial produce, among which the most prominent were silk, fabric, cambric, weft, and kerchiefs. Silk cloth was mainly used to complete the wedding attire. Women wore it as headdress. Kerchiefs were used as indispensable accessories of the traditional dress. Red was the most dominating color, followed by the white or cream color. Other accessory materials to make women more attractive in prime days included ribbons, braids, laces, beads, buttons, caps, belts, jewelry, and chaplets. The female look of the wedding day had to be the pure reflection of a strong and yet refined woman with finesse. This part of the character of a southern coastal bride could be plainly read from the red or milk-colored kerchief to the chaplets and attire woven and embroidered with golden threads.

The rich people imported many of articles of their costumes, whereas those with average income purchased very few imported items for their wedding dresses. The Balkan dresses must have had great similarity as witnessed by the English traveler, J. C. Hobhouse, who said that most wedding items were imported from Italy. The bright colored headdress were imported from Italy and, once sold to people, underwent the process of embroidery with typical Albanian motifs or embroidered laces were attached to the lower ends. The golden galloons used at that time came from Vienna, but Albanians would place their signature with traditional ornamentations. Knives, blades, swords, and muzzles were imported from Venice of Italy, but were definitely adorned and carved with Albanian motifs to give a national spirit to the imported items. These items were used, among others, in wedding ceremonies to create a festive atmosphere and the most expensive and precious weapons were revealed to honor this important day. In the 19th century¹², felt, which was close to fabric, was used to produce festive dresses.

¹²As indicated in an article on Albanian dresses of 19th century (See www.erinadacine.ws/2013/06/30/3-veshje-ne-shekujt-xix-xx)

Traditionally, the cloth was embroidered with dense red or dark red thread combined with yellow lines yarns. When viewed from a distance, the motifs created the impression of various geometric patterns that played aesthetically to the eyes. The yarn produced simple flower patterns and design internally. Felt was imported to various Balkan countries, but was made by hand in specialized workshops. Such was the white fabric produced in Romania or the blue fabric produced in Presheva used for men's long bloomers. Both types of cloth were imported to southern coastal area principally for festivities and weddings.

Most fabric was made in Albania by locals, but sometimes rich people preferred imported cloth. It is worth mentioning the importance and the broad use of woolen fabric with traditional design, such as colorful diamonds, work with red, green or black hues. This type of fabric was used as thick belts and socks for males in festive events and as a corset attached to the waist for women. In consideration of the coastal climate of the southern area, this attire was important also because of the motifs that replicated the Albanian nature of the southern coast.



Figure 1. Men's felt (kersey) cover



Figure 2. Women's felt (kersey) cover

(Source: www.shqiperia.com and www.forumshqiptar.com)

Aesthetic maintenance has been and continues to be connate to Albanians. To this end, special importance was paid to outfit and relevant accessories.

Therefore, garment and textile industry made up a large share of the country's economy. Most villagers in southern coastal areas produced many of their garments on their own. They even had special tools and mechanisms to produce traditional cloth.

These are the main reasons that folk attire in these areas preserved a quite discernable regional specificity in terms of patterns of design and ornamentation of wedding dresses. Thus, the increase of production and introduction of factory-produced materials as well as the close contacts with the towns contributed to the improvement of folk dresses in both content and form, because new raw material and work techniques coupled with novel design ornamentations came to use.

Their positive effect is completely experienced in traditional folk costumes. The use of felt and other silk cloth or golden or silver threads as well as of factory-produced colorful yarns to adorn some parts of costumes of the southerner wedders enhanced the artistic value of the folk dresses in general.

The variety of traditional attire is rich, particularly at regional level, where the kersey cover was widely used, about which Lord Byron¹³ and J. C Hobhouse wrote. Both these distinguished travelers noted that up to Delvinaki, the traditional attire, particularly the wedding costume, constituted of typical long woolen bloomers made of blue felt. Another feature of the costume included the cotton cloth, or *fustanella*.

Lord Byron's description brings vivid the shirt, the cotton underwear, the white woolen collar, the doublet, the small headdress, the belt and holster, the leather moccasins, and the weapons. This costume is used in celebration and festive events.

Another English traveler of 1812-1813, H. Holland, similar to Hobhouse¹⁴, described several parts of the Albanian costume of the southern coast, placing some emphasis on the cloak, about which he notes: "*The capote or the great cloke, one of most striking peculiarities of the Albanese dress, –a coarse, shaggy, woolen garment, with open sleeves and a square flap behind, which server occasionally as a hood, the colour sometimes grey or white so as to give the resemblance of a goat-skin thrown over the back.*"

The *fustanella* is considered by many authors similar to the Scottish kilt. The difference between a Scottish kilt and Albanian *fustanella* is the length and the composition of the cloth. Scots use mainly red and green wool.

Similar to the Scottish kilt, the Albanian *fustanella* is associated with a half-length shirt, but the cloth is bright-(milky) colored pleated skirt-like garment, sometimes combined with red and black colors (to reflect the national spirit).

The Souliotes have been distinguished for their striking character and, among others, for inheriting their culture –the traditional costume being one of the major elements– from one generation to another. Their dress contains dynamic figures as shown in the tableau entitled "The last protector of Missolonghi" (1826) of the French painter Ary Scheffer, in the works of Delacroix, and, later, in the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Because of the great variety of the traditional costumes of the southern areas, it was oftentimes necessary for the Albanian costume to have a base model, a reference point or foundation. Yet, a 'compromise' was never reached in this aspect.

Like many other authors, Bue considers the "Albanian costume" for men the attire made up of short shirt, underwear, *fustanella*, bottomless socks, waistcoat, doublet, dolman, woolen cover, fez, and leather moccasins.

¹³ In his work *Childe Harold*, Lord Byron describes his journey in the Albanian territories. He provides a narration of the cultural characteristics, including costumes.

¹⁴ Based in the article on Albanian costumes of the southern area quoting Lord Byron's journey and book, published in www.erinadacineews.wordpress.com/2013/06/30/3-veshje-ne-shekujt-xix-xx



Moccasins (Source: www.skyscrapercity.com)



A Fustanella (Source: Wikipedia)

Going beyond the Bue boundaries, we see another striking garment, the long bloomers, which originated from central Albania, but their use expanded over to the southern part of the country. Wide knee-length breeches made of blue fabric or felt were also frequently used. Laberia was the area where this type of garment was mostly used. Later, this piece of clothing replaced the fustanella in some southern areas.

Women's dresses were quite different. From the second half of the 19th century, the Laberia and Tsamouria part replaced their folk dresses with oriental clothing, such as slops, wide baggy pants or long sleeve shirt and velvet gowns. A dress was the most widely used attire for Laberia women, particularly for wedding ceremonies. According to researcher Sejmen Gjokoli, a later dressing type included loose slops, which was a completely unlikely element to the traditional dress. This may be affected by the various historical moments, as indicated by Gjokoli¹⁵, who observes that men's costume of wedding ceremonies had more original elements. According to him, a southern coastal wedder's attire included long fustanella and tight woolen pants, bloomers and knee-length sock necks and long loose breeches. Part of the folk costume and dresses included moccasins made of cattle skin, tanned dark-hide moccasins, top-knotted moccasins, and the white fez.

Traditional dresses have features that closely relate not only with the culture but also with the climate, terrain, land or distinctiveness of the character. Thus, in certain areas of Vlora, dresses were made of flax and gorse for garments and ground covers, unlike mountainous areas, where wool prevailed. Reflected in dresses, peculiarities of character were noted in Himara people, as they added a particular component to the doublet, shirt, flannel, bloomers, coat, moccasins, or fustanella, sock neck, mantle, gown, etc. In celebratory days, men wore fustanellas, which constituted of a white shirt with long loose sleeves, doublet with the corselets knotted under the armpit. The corselets were black-dyed with golden or white geometrical patterns. The long belt that surrounded the fustanella was red and palm-sized wide. The youth wore woolen socks of various designs, while the elders preferred one-color socks. The shoes worn with fustanella were leather-made, mainly red, with a black pompon on top. The change of color of socks required the change of the pompon. Until the end of the 19th century, men wore woolen knee-length bloomers, while in previous centuries these bloomers were black. During this period, the fez was either red or black. Loose pants made of felt or drapery as well as one-color English cashmere costumes became fashionable by this time. In the 20th century, the bridegroom wore necktie and ribbons that would always be part of his dress in his entire manhood. The tight woolen pants were accompanied with black, brown, or white long socks. Thinly-worked sock necks were worn just above the socks.

To achieve harmony and to highlight the aesthetical taste, the fustanella was worn together with the doublet, which unlike in Laberia, where it was one-colored, in Himara, the doublet was black or sometimes brown, while the back was dull grey or white. The doublet was preferred to be short so that men, usually Himara people, would find it easier to "protect their pride" in spicy moments. It stretched to the waist and was adorned with golden stripes and geometric patterns. A fustanella was also dressed together with sock necks, which were tube-tailored with thin white felt so as to highlight the pulp of the legs.

Brides covered their hair with a thin silk headscarf with embroidered corners. Later, the embroidery was enhanced with colorful beads and braids. They wore jewelry, such as earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and other accessories such as crosses, hearts, eagles or snail-shaped silver. Women wore tight dresses hanging down to the shin, with top hole wide enough to wear from head. Young women preferred pleated dresses. The waistcoat was an associating element of the dress and was used during bridal days. It was thinly tailored, even though the drapery was thick and colorful for young people. Underwear included thin shirt, called 'linje', probably because it was made of white linen.

¹⁵ Based on quote from the respective article on aesthetic values of Albanian traditional dresses <http://www.dritaislame.al/veshjet-tradicionale-nuk-stimulohet-prodhimi/>

The Himara women wore knee-length socks adorned with thin woolen threads of brown, blue, or black color to adapt to family members' age and circumstances. Another associative element included the moccasins made of rubber or leather, as per the season and weather. In festive days or Sundays, women preferred to wear raw-hide pompon-topped shoes.

Likewise, in this respect, the traditions of the Narta village are quite distinctive, as its costumes are uncommon and do not resemble with those of other areas in Vlora and elsewhere in the country. The dresses in these areas are worked with satin, which is a unique element in the materials used for folk dresses, and with flax.

The folk costumes of the south coastal areas are richly diverse serving as a cultural resource. According well-known Vlora painter, Hilmi Bani, "This variety of colors and styles in the conceptualization of folk costumes is very interesting from the artistic viewpoint and is probably a peculiarity when compared with other regions of the country." An important part reflecting the culture and traditions, the folk costumes of the coastal area would make one more tourist attraction. "The striking and original motifs drop tourist jaws. Yet, there is no market where these folk and traditional costumes may be promoted," says ethnologist Thanas Gega, who is very fond of folk dresses. He adds: Encouragement of the production of these costumes would help to operate a market of great economic and promotional values."

References

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