

# Tradition in new global contexts: From living to survival



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## ABSTRACT

The continuity of tradition in present times can not imply only its transmission in time and space, but also building of new concepts through selection and adaptation of values and beliefs, which reach into the present and confirm collective identity.

Today, in the conditions of globalization and technological flows, when the traditional scheme of cultural communication and cultural contacts has changed, we distribute our tradition in different ways and contexts. This process determines also the conception of a series of rites, namely family rites, such as those of a wedding, which under new circumstances are subjected to modification and consequently to transformation. Certainly, such a progress in the field of ethno-culture also reveals the indispensable need for research and discussion, such as: How much have geopolitical changes and the free movement influenced the transmission of values and how much affected the preservation of our ethno cultural identity? What is the role of digital technology in general, in the traditional culture? What are the traditional elements of these family rites, crucial to human life, which have survived? What are the new elements in (re)actualization of these rites in contemporary times? What is the interaction of these elements within the cultural and social processes which can lead them in the future to be considered as 'traditional'? In addition to relevant literature on this issue, the paper is also based on the empirical data.

## KEYWORDS:

traditional, globalization, context, rite, (re)actualization

## INTRODUCTION

In the present time, Albanian folkloristics is preoccupied with the process of the evolution of folklore, influenced by social changes in recent decades, in social, economic and political aspects. These social changes enabled a rapid technical, cultural, educational and artistic development in Albanian culture. But on the other hand, by these changes in contemporary times, folklore is facing new and different circumstances from those social circumstances that conditioned its creation and conveyed it among different generations, as a traditional culture.<sup>1</sup> Most folklorists consider that the field of folklore can significantly contribute to the meaningfulness and understanding of transcultural values. Starting from this point we will first dwell on the definition of the term 'folklore'. The term was first used by William Thoms in

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1 The Albanian culture due to different factors has experienced quite complex socio-cultural transition and it could be ascertained this happened approximately in similar way, in entire Balkan region. However, these transition routes towards modernization differ from those followed by the most other European cultures.



1846 in the magazine 'The Athenaeum'. This English language term composed from the words *folk* and *lore* (meaning popular/folk knowledge), and created difficulties in defining these two constituent words of this term. Thus, the American folklorist Alan Dundes, with the expression folk defines each group of people having at least one common factor. Such groups are usually classified based on profession, age, region, and regional or national affiliation (Dundes, 1965). Russian folklorists in the past defined folklore as based on its class character and opposing it to the formal art of the higher classes. Gusev thinks that in socialist societies, folklore is not the creation of single class, but it becomes creation of the people, because in socialist society the people consist of two friendly classes (Lozica, 1979: 36). Folklore is also defined as the creativity of certain groups of people who communicate verbally within the group and knowing each other. This conception of folklore is created upon the interaction within these groups which, at the same time, create, carry and are an audience that accepts and approves that folkloric creation. Because of this fact, Jakobson's and Bogatyrev's preventative censorship, in addition to interpretation and oral distribution or conveyance, presents the characteristics of this concept on folk creations (Bošković-Stulli, 1971: 17-30).

Initial studies were made also in the field of Albanian folkloristics which defined the folklore in general as well as the oral creativity in particular, as 'folk culture', as pure originally artistic composition, created by the people. Any other form of this composition has been considered as a degradation of originally popular creativity, as a deformation that has partly ruined the authenticity of traditional culture. According to these studies, tradition implies one of the specific characteristics of folk creativity and folk culture in general, as well as an obligation for its bearers and creators to use the forms and the practices created traditionally over the generations.

In present circumstances of contemporary society, the evolution of folklore appears in some of its basic elements. Researcher on aesthetics of folklore Uçi, determines the folklore evolution in these following points: **a.** Within collective character of the folklore is becoming increasingly stronger than the individual creative initiative; **b.** The circulation of folklore formerly transmitted orally is now being done with modern technical means of transmission, which are taking on the role of presentation and dissemination of folklore giving it a new form of contemporary existence; **c.** The weakening of the syncretic character of folklore, which, unlike in the past, when it was related to magical purposes of rituals and various ceremonies, nowadays continues to be sung and danced without any such function but merely for its artistic value; **d.** Increased approximation of popular art to other cultural artistic formations; **e.** Extension of the environmental borders between traditional social/rural and non-traditional/urban in which specific setting constantly circulate folkloric artistic values, especially with technical means of transmission and contemporary culture.

Identification of the consequences of the evolution of folklore in contemporary times has had an impact on defining more correctly the very concept of folklore, the content of which as seen differs, depending on the level of social development. This concept of folklore includes all those traditional genres that have active, creative, productive lives that have a social, conceptual and aesthetic intra-folk basis, as well

as those traditional rites and customs that are included in this notion, and although they are not quite implicit for this degree of social development, they are reactivated in the new conditions of present time life through partial execution by folklore bearers (Uçi, 2007: 377-385).

Albanian folkloristics, while facing contemporary development processes in society and its reflection on folklore, considers indispensable the problem of academic criteria by which is made the distinction between traditional folklore and the present-day folklore.

## THE TRADITIONAL IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Tradition as a heritage and a process is part of any culture in the history of humankind and without it neither the existence of any human community can be assumed. The etymology of the word tradition is of Latin origin, from the word *traditio*<sup>2</sup> and it indicates transmission and conveyance among generations, oral dissimulation of narratives, lessons, beliefs, rites, etc. This process of oral and written transmission of ideas, values and principles from generation to generation known as the notion of tradition, is a category with many meanings and has many definitions in different fields of study, such as folklore, cultural anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies.

Regarding the folkloristics, as scholars of folklore Sims and Stephens emphasize since its foundation this discipline it is based on the study of tradition. The concept of tradition and how our knowledge on it is developed is the fundamental issue of folklore studies and therefore tradition is something that first comes to mind when we want to consider the definition of folklore itself because both terms, tradition and folklore, draw on some concepts that have reciprocal relation.

Tradition continues to be a fundamental issue of research in folkloristics, even though with the development and changes within the discipline, the way the tradition is understood by folklorists has also changed. It is no longer just something that is transmitted from one generation to the other, as a way of preserving their cultural past. But instead, as elements of tradition are set “those characteristics upon which groups lie in their struggle to maintain a sense of group identity” (Sims — Stephens, 2005: 64-65).

The concept of continuity is an indicator of how important for the tradition are repetitions, because a group repeats only the important things for the formation of their community and does not repeat the insignificant ones, which do not pass into tradition. Continuity does not imply the unchanging of the original form of the tradition during repetition, but its continuity ‘refers to the threads of meaning and significance that connect traditions with groups’. Therefore, Sims and Stephens conclude that:

“It helps us see that tradition doesn’t always move in a “straight line” from past to present, one generation to the next. Tradition incorporates space as well as time:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/>



we share traditions from grup to grup, person to person, place to place — *in the present* — across and within groups” (Sims — Stephens, 2005: 66).

Given this definition of tradition, this notion appears as a dynamic meaning coming from the past, but not permanent in time, but as a continuous process, followed by a development and changeability, created throughout humans’ lives. Therefore, nowadays the traditional intangible/spiritual culture does not represent the wholeness of that past traditional culture, but represents a current traditional culture where, due to various factors, something is always lost or transformed, gaining new forms and features that appear in certain periods, but which in the future may also become themselves part of a ‘cultural tradition’.

For the researcher Anttonen, the idea of cultural evolution which is directly related to the process of modernization, defines tradition and modernity as a dichotomous category.

“The dichotomy of modernity and tradition constructs a historical narrative according to which social life and societies are first based on tradition, signifying thus static cultural continuity and conservatism, while modernity follows tradition, signifying cultural change and the end of tradition [...] The dichotomy of tradition and modernity is a modern theoretical axiom on social change, according to which modernization stands for the decrease and eventual disappearance of tradition” (Anttonen, 2005: 34).

But tradition inherited from the past can not always be taken as the opposite of modernity and disconnected from the interpretation of the tradition in the present. Because both the process of modernization and that of globalization, today is considered as a reflection of a local material and spiritual culture opposite to the global, as well as the rural one to urban environments. And as Durkheim ascertains, these two controversy tendencies complement each other, whilst Tomlinson considers that globalization actually proliferates rather than destroys identities, therefore “globalization is really the globalization of modernity, and modernity is the harbinger of identity.” (Tomlinson 2003: 271; Kadriu 2009: 51). Thus, at the time of globalization, which is treated as an actual process of social and cultural developmental dynamics, or globalization seen as a tendency for the creation of an idea of a new world global order, there surfaces also the imposed dilemma on the question what are the fundamental characteristics of the already-formed cultural changes in the context of contemporary provocations.

To the globalization tendency as a global trend, by all means, has contributed the virtual space of quick information, which created the possibility of a new dominant form of communication among internet users. Communication comes in new forms, such as various pages, like: Google and Youtube, various social networks, and various information portals. This new form of communication is also becoming a carrier of traditional culture in general, which is preliminary reconstructed by changing the traditional practice of performing, by being adapted to an audience that likes to attend them. It means that in the internet are shown both the old values, or those

created upon them, and entirely new creations, often alienated, offering and enabling access, analysis and study of these values, especially for social and humane fields.



## CONTEXT OF (RE)ACTUALIZING A TRADITIONAL RITE

Rituals represent stereotypical performances, which according to Turner are actions that involve gestures, words and objects that are executed in a special preparatory place and that are addressed to the supernatural powers or creatures with an aim for them to affect on the welfare of the rite performer (Turner, 2008: 1–4).

Such rituals have been numerous in traditional Albanian culture, but those that are practiced during the life cycle, such as birth, marriage and death, marking a passage from one life stage to another, are among those rituals that survived the longest and partially up to the present time.

Researching such rituals in contemporary times proves that no matter how much has the faith in the mystic forces dissipated, as well as the practice of magical rites in their archaic forms, they are today manifested during celebrations by means of relics and elements that testify a cultural continuity, which through tradition in the family expresses its continuity to each individual. Cultural tradition during its evolutionary process, no matter how much it resists the influences of various factors in society, tends to accept new elements that are produced by social and cultural reality, as well as new elements quite often modified and influenced by other cultures. Because as Giddens considers:

“Tradition is not completely static, because it is rediscovered by each new generation, when inheriting cultural heritage from their ancestors. Tradition does not resist the changes to the extent it belongs within the context in which are present several separate space and temporal determinants, in the frame of which that change might have any meaningful form” (Giddens, 1998:44).

Therefore, due to a myriad of changes, the rituals must also be treated in the perspective of current context. Dundes defines the context as a visible setting in which performance occurs (Sims & Stephens, 2005: 137). Hence, the study of the context of a rite is necessary to be related to the specific social, economic, and cultural setting within which it is carried out. It is clear that even when a repeated ritual remains unchanged in time, its meaning may change profoundly from the nature of the initial context. Researcher Cannadine, who studied the context, performance and understanding of the ritual, considers that:

“No analysis restricted to the text, which ignores both the nature of the performance and the ‘thick’ description of context, can hope to offer a historically convincing explanation of the ‘meaning’ of royal ritual and ceremonial [...]” (Cannadine, 2014: 143).



To analyze the transformations/modifications of a family rite, from past and today, as a consequence of the new circumstances of globalization and technological flood, when the transmission of 'traditional' is disseminated in different ways and contexts, in the next part of this paper I will focus on the changes that are taking place within the 'henna ritual' as a rite of passage within the wedding ceremony, which continues to be practiced as a symbolic celebration even today.<sup>3</sup>

Here I would like to give an explanation about the difference between the rite and the celebration, on which differences in the rite of henna were analyzed. By rite it is meant the event, the ceremony followed by different rituals, which are made according to a rule determined by tradition for the certain cases of life, which are dominated by real emotions, beliefs, and superstitions, while by celebration is meant the festivation/jollyfication of a day or of an important moment in life, during which although there are not performed rituals with strict rules as before, so without strong emotions and superstitions attached to them, they are still performed in a symbolic way, in public settings, such as restaurants, and can only be regarded as arranged performances.

Body coloring dates from ancient times, a practice that today can be said is to be expressed in the form of different actual tattoos. Whilst, the symbolism of the rite of henna, which means the coloring of the women's limbs, well-known to many cultures around the world, in traditional Albanian culture it is manifested as the rite of henna night that was organized during the wedding ceremony at the girl's house, before she became a bride.

The initiation phenomenon, which became the main subject in Arnold van Gennep's theory, was based on the transition process of each individual from one life phase to another, implying transition from one age to another, or from one social status/position to another, defined these rituals as rites of passage. He considers the initiation as a prototype of all the rites of passage (Gennep, 1960). So, based on Gennep's theory, the rite of henna, as the rite of passage within the traditional wedding ceremony, which was once held in the bride's family, today occurs as a celebration of the former rite with ceremonial elements of a new culture, which is being adopted and adapted in Albanian culture as a reflection of socio-cultural change in everyday life.

As for the traditional ritual of the rite of henna, this rite was a ceremony that was practiced on the last night before marriage, at the bride's-to-be house. Under the influence of the concept of patriarchal morality which prevailed for a long time in Albanian tradition, in the family of the bride-to-be during this event did not prevail the atmosphere of joy and happiness therefore the solemnity of the wedding was more restricted. For this solemn act there exist different names, such as: 'nata e bojës' (Night of Colouring), 'nata e kanës' (Henna Night), and 'kënjagjegje' (Henna Night

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3 For the change of the rite of henna in contemporary times, the research is based on the interview with the subject Kaltrina Lohaj, who willingly performed this rite in one of her restaurants in her village in Ferizaj (city of Kosovo) and on the interview with Ina Shaqiri, the manager of the company „InAlb Decor“, which deals with the organization of this rite for wedding ceremony. With both subjects, the interview was conducted in July 2017.





in Turkish). This ceremony was preceded by a series of rites like: ‘marrja e masës’ (Size Taking) or ‘këputja e penit’ (Cutting off the thread), ‘ndarja e vades’ (Setting the wedding date), ‘dërgimi i petkave’ (Sending of bride’s clothes), ‘shprishja e gërshetit’ (Tousling the braid) etc<sup>4</sup>. In a word the whole wedding ceremony in the girl’s house was focused on the preparation of a girl to become a bride. So, on the night before the wedding, the bride was surrounded by women, girls of the extended family and more, but also her friends who would tousle her braids (a symbolic act by which the future bride was distancing from the girlhood) and she got her hair coloured (in earlier times with a paint (bojë,<sup>5</sup>) which later got substituted by henna with which the bride also painted her hands and fingers). Henna was sent together with ‘bridal clothes (‘petkat e nuses’) (clothes sent as a gift exclusively for the bride) a week before the wedding day by the groom’s family. Other girls that were present in the henna ceremony would also colour their fingers with henna, which supposedly represents the visual residues of marriage purification since the ancient times when group marriages were arranged, at the same day with equal expenses for as many boys as girls (Pllana 2004: 126).

Certainly, for a given time context, this rite carries within it the stamp of time, showing a certain structure of the past and a certain degree of social development. Today, in spite of a fundamental change in understanding of traditional marriages, where the key role plays emotional engagement in a marital relationship, this ritual continues to be performed throughout Kosovo, the present time has made it easier as a practice since now the rite of henna can be improvised and performed in a new context of celebration in the halls and restaurants and at a high cost, which at the other hand can not be afforded by every family. Such phenomena are present in other cultures as well, in which even though marriages were widespread and usual, in recent decades the norms of this marriage have fallen drastically and the marriage has changed from being an universal rite of passage into a celebration of prominent part of life of the middle classes (Pauli & van Dijk 2017: 257).

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- 4 These former traditional wedding rites nowadays have completely disappeared, since in present times the girls already know their size, chooses wedding ceremony dresses and other wardrobe themselves, and for her make-up and looks choose their favourite or affordable stylist.
- 5 This rite of passage was formerly known in Albanian traditional culture as a colouring of bride’s head vertex or just one of her hair thread in black colour, symbolizing the separation from girlhood period and the passage into bridehood period, and it was practiced among families of Catholic confession. Upon the dispersion of Muslim religion among Albanians, this colour was replaced by henna and the practice of colouring hands by henna dotting, in some villages colouring half of the fingers, as well as drawing of the triangle inside and out of the palm, started. This triangle according to the scholars is a symbol of fertility; a trace remained from mythology of Illyrians, which is connected to Illyrian amulets that were also symbols of fertility (Mustafa 1979: 157–170; Stipçeviq 1979: 19–46). Nowadays, according to explanations of InaShaqiri, the manager of InAlb Decor and organizer of henna night in therestaurants, bride’s both palms are coloured by henna, while in her friends’ palm, present at the ceremony, is written by henna the first letter of brides name. This colour will last for few days.



Specifically, at the time in which we live, the culture is being marketed as a result of the intensifying processes of consumerism and commercialization, so the question is raised of how these processes use the culture, including the traditional one, by changing it to the needs of the market. In addition, the customer does not only include the consumption of only objects and services, but also of the values, ideas, artistic and media performances. This way, what is consumed determines our identity, even though we know that it is subjected to a constant transformation and redefinition. On the other hand, the issue of commercialization is the issue of industry and business, in which culture is simply a tool (Мартиноска, 2018: 29).

But, “modern societies still need the myth and ritual [...]” as I. Gilmour observes (Cannadine, 2014: 139). That is why it could be considered that this ritual was restored only as a symbolic act<sup>6</sup>, because the bride in the actual context arrives/comes to the celebration of Henna night prepared by aesthetic salons. Beside the decoration of such halls for both, weddings and henna night, in these facilities is offered the possibility for the improvisation of henna application night in spectacular manner. This spectacularness is achieved by the fact that it is being organized by special agencies.<sup>7</sup> These agencies consist of a director acting as a “professional”, usually a woman that arranges the flow of this spectacle, which hires 6 to 8 girls, (very often dancers in folklore ensembles), which are clothed in “traditional costume uniforms” or red dresses (depending on the wish and choice of the bride/client); they dance, hold candles, and sing. So, differently from what happened in the past, nowadays the celebration is performed in a “perfect” way, in the sense that every detail is well thought by a “professional”, at the extend in which the spectators, in this case the invited women, might think that this has always been practiced this way.

So, considering the improvisation of this rite from the point of view of alternation, as a result of cultural changes, the need for systematic efforts to analyze them within a comparative and contextual framework is increased.

The impact of contemporary global culture, even though quite rarely, has led to the practice of a completely new celebration form of this rite of passage without having any common element with that of a traditional rite. In some Western cultures, compared to the Balkan region, there is a practice for a girl and/or also the boy who are about to pass from their bachelor/ette status to the married one, to organize, separately, each of them for their close friends, a celebration which is known in their cultures as ‘Bachelor/ette Party’, by which they mark the change in their social status.

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6 Kaltrina Lohaj, the interviewee, says that while her grandmother had a traditional rite of henna in her parents’ home, her mother, who belongs to another a educated generation, was reluctant to make this ritual during the marriage, because she has considered it an unstable superstition, and she has expressed her desire to organize, by engaging the InAlb Decor agency, to make this ritual symbolically in the restaurant.

7 The agency “InAlb Decor” managed by Ina Shaqiri, in the interview highlighted that the entire decor for the “henna night” is obtained by the agency, consisting of hall decor, costumes of associating singing girls, as well as a special singer singing particular traditional song dedicated to the bride to be, and this specific rite. But they also offer scenarios for the birth rite and that of circumcision depending on client’s request.



The same has started to be practiced in Kosovo, especially by girls. But, this kind of celebration with “Bachelorette Party” can not yet be considered to be generalized in Albanian culture in Kosovo. However, if we consider the definition of the subculture by Eduard Kale, who claims that “there is a consent in the cultural studies that subcultures are characterized by specific systems and meanings, by specific status, material stuff, and partially also specific values, and in this pattern special styles are surfaced,” (Kadriu 2007:313) then this type of celebration as a special style, can also be classified in the category of a subcultural celebration, which did not yet gain a broad or general dimension and is still considered just as borrowed celebration phenomenon from a global culture.

## CONCLUSION

Based on what was said above, it can be concluded that the tradition, despite its referential meaning established to distinguish it from present times, can not avoid its temporal dimension, so the tradition that is passed on does not have a uniform continuity. During its evolutionary process, tradition can not resist the influences of various factors in society, it tends to accept new elements produced by social and cultural reality, as well as by newly modified elements and also influenced by other cultures. Interaction of these elements within the cultural and social processes can have such an impact so that in the future they will be considered as traditional, but will always appear in the comparison and creation of differences.

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