

# RITUAL OF CHILDBIRTH IN SOUTHEASTERN COAST OF ALBANIA

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## ***Abstract***

This paper elaborates on the importance of culture and traditions of childbirth in the southwestern coast of Albania and assesses the wealth of rites, customs, and traditions as well as the wish of Albanians, particularly in this area, to have large families. This study helps to learn more about the process of childbirth, associated with pagan and religious rites of the region, viewed with the eyes of those that lived it in the last century. It seeks to highlight the importance of male child to Albanian families as a means to ensure the future generation of the household or family kin, to identify the advantages of birth and the sufferings and disadvantages of a barren woman. The analysis of the goal of this study uses these research methods: analysis of secondary data and quality method of data collection through interviews on site, study of various primary and secondary sources of data as well as old publications linked with the goal of this study. The study makes use of the data obtained from local researchers and interviews with many people who have witnessed or experienced birth experiences in their homes in the last century. The findings of this study point out that the southwestern coast has rich traditions, rites, practices, customs, and experiences that provide a combination of the typical dresses of the area, diverse cuisine, and songs and dances for moments of joy of childbirth. This study pays attention to other cases in which the childbirth and the born children posed problems, underlying religious prejudices associating these cases and the customs inherited for centuries long.

## **The field and the key words**

*Field* – ethnography in the southwestern coast of Albania

*Key Words* – tradition, childbirth, religious faith, pagan rites and customs,

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In the tradition of the Albanian southeastern coast, an area that encompasses the villages of Himara, Borsh, Dhermi, Pilur, Piqeras and southward to Saranda, the birth to a child, particularly the first baby boy, constituted a big celebration and fulfillment of the wish for family's legacy. Ahead of birth of the child, while the baby was in its mother's womb, everyone asked: "What will the bride give birth to? Will it be a boy or a girl?" Everyone was keen to know. This keenness and anxiety was particularly noticed in those households that did not have many males in the kin. These families were impatient to welcome a baby boy in their family. Oftentimes the urge to have a baby boy in the household is identified in folk songs of the region. Below are the verses on the urge for baby boy in a pre-wedding song:

*Nëm një kupë miellë, / Të martojmë lalenë, / T'i apemë çalenë, / Të na tundnjë djalenë.<sup>1</sup>*  
*(Gimme a cup of flour / Our son is getting married /*  
*Send him his pretty wife / To "shake the baby boy in cradle)*

In fact, the wish to have as many males in the house was seen when the family would select the bride for one of the sons. The bride should come from a 'clan or household that had plenty of males' so as to ensure heirship. This is carved in the folk songs of the region, as sung in the following poetry:

*Aty tërë nusët, / Vetëm djema bëjnë, / Vërtet tërë lulet, / Rriten plot me këngë<sup>2</sup>*  
*(All brides there / give birth to boys / Really All flowers / grow up in songs)*

When the bride entered the house, after throwing rice (symbol of fertility) and wheat (symbol of luck), she was asked to hold a baby boy on her lap in the evening as a wish and desire that she would give birth to a boy.

According to folk poet of the southern coast, Lefter Çipa, the first baby boy born in a family was welcomed and considered "an angel's gift", sign of luck, prosperity, and security of the future generation of the family trunk or kin.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there have been many cases where a bride was placed in a sheep pen or barn intentionally to "assuage" the labor pains, to have the child blessed and to scare evil spirits away. Similar to the entire area of Laberia, according to local beliefs, domestic animals, such as cows, sheep, goats, etc., were god-blessed and they would protect the child from the evil eye. Likewise, in case the newly-born baby was a boy, he would be placed next to cattle or olive groves, because the latter constituted two of the main sources of household economy and the boys were expected to keep up the livestock husbandry or olive cultivation, the key traditions not only for the southwestern coast but for

<sup>1</sup> Gjoni, M. "Shën Vasili, fshat i dëgjuar", Milosao Publishing House, Saranda, 2006, p. 177

<sup>2</sup> Çipa, L. "Princi i dashurisë", Naimi Publishing House and Literary Studio, Tiranë 2010, p. 177

<sup>3</sup> Interview with south-westerner folk poet Lefter Çipa, on August 11, 2012

the entire South Albania. And the tradition is intertwined with the folk poetry, as in the following verses:

*Njëqind ullinj në grope / Mitrua m'i trashegoftë, / Bëftë djem e i gëzofhtë!*<sup>4</sup>  
(One hundred olive trees in the plain / May Mitro inherit them, / May he have many sons and rejoice!)

Men represented the basis of continuity of race and family as well as the major power capable of labor and production. Below are few verses of a folk song on the urge to have a baby boy:

*Çdo ditë që do gdhihet / Kjo hëna e parë, / Dhëndri porositet, / Shpejt të bëjë djalë*<sup>5</sup>  
(Each new day arising / In this first full moon / The bridegroom is ordered / To have a son soon)

So immense and persistent was the desire for a baby boy that locals would say ‘the house rejoiced with the birth of a boy and its pillars gloomed with the birth of a girl.’<sup>6</sup> Unless the bride of the household had already given birth to a boy or a girl, she would behave humbly towards other members of the family, particularly female members. She had to be obedient and look down when talking with others, until the day she bore, the day a baby boy’s cries filled the house. In this case, her position would become so strong that she would receive the keys to the house from her mother-in-law.<sup>7</sup>

When the young bride was ready to give birth, everything in the house would have to be unlocked, including doors and padlocks; shirts and other dresses, even those in the chest, had to be unbuttoned, so as to make childbirth easy. In case it was getting too long for the child to come out, the woman serving as midwife would summon the expectant bride’s closest man to cross over her three times singing “if you are a boy, come out and pick up the gun; if you are a girl, come out and pick up the hayfork.”<sup>8</sup>

Similar to other areas of Albania, women were the main working power to toil the soil and perform other agricultural chores. Women toiled and irrigated the land, planted, harvested and threshed the crops, and farmed the cattle in mountains or in little sheds in mountain plateaus. Households that had a large number of cattle and sheep had already built small cottages in mountains where usually young men would summer and provide the cattle and sheep with fresh pastures. In addition, women had to carry water in barrels from the village sources or springs to their houses. They had to go to mountains to cut firewood for the cold winters. This life was hard for women, but definitely harder for the pregnant ones. Sometimes, women in labor had to give birth in their ‘workplace’ that could be anything, including cowshed, arable land, the water spring, mountain forests, cottage in the mountain for summering the cattle and sheep, etc. The birth process was, of course, very difficult and delicate.

<sup>4</sup> Gjoni, M. “Shën Vasili, fshat i dëgjuar”, Milosao Publishing House, Saranda, 2006, p. 180

<sup>5</sup> Çipa, L. “Princi i dashurisë”, Naimi Publishing House and Literary Studio, Tiranë 2010, p. 45

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bixhili, F. “Jipet e Iperit, Himariotët”, Toena Publishing House, Tirana, 2004, p. 133

<sup>8</sup> Bixhili, F. “Jipet e Iperit, Himariotët”, Toena Publishing House, Tirana, 2004, p. 134

The southwestern women would generally give birth at home or in their workplace, quite similar to women in other areas of the country, where their babies were born in house, plains, cowsheds, forests, rivers, etc. There were many cases where women experienced birth pangs as they were carrying water home, because villages lack aqueducts and water springs were very far. Women heavy with child could faint on their way to make firewood, clean mountain cottages, or toil the land.

During the laboring process, expectant women were assisted by experienced elder women. In the probable absence of these women and in case only men were close to the laboring woman, the eldest man, particularly one with knowledge and hopefully some experience on childbirth would come to assist in the birth process. There have been many cases where husbands would get into the process to help their wives give birth. Husbands usually accompanied their wives to the workplace. They walked 2-3 steps ahead as if to pave the way—a typical Albanian custom until 20<sup>th</sup> century. Without the know-how or with very little oral knowledge on childbirth, husbands would get to work to give their contribution in smoothing the progress of the childbirth process. According to a story told by a local researcher,<sup>9</sup>—it has turned into a legend by now—a man happened to assist his wife to give birth. When he saw how wide the opening was for the child to come out, he was so deeply perturbed that he refused to touch his wife for three years with the thought that her genital organ was still wide open and dirty with blood. Thus, his wife talked to her mother-in-law, her husband's mother, about his refusal to engage in physical contact with her since he had seen and helped her with the childbirth. The elder woman talked to her husband, the young man's father, about the young couple's problem, and asked him to talk to his son. Both father and son went out for a walk along the seashore. The old man threw a rock in the sea and asked his son to see what was happen thereafter. The rock fell into the sea opening up a big hole, but after a few moments the sea level was flat again with the big hole gone. "Did you see what happened to the water surface?" the father asked. "I did", his son answered. "Did you see how the big hole opened from the rock and then leveled off? This has happened to your wife. So, go to her, son, and enjoy her", the old man finished his parable.

Once the baby was born, the midwives attending the birth process would cut the umbilical cord with a clean knife or scissors. When the young bride gave birth in the field or mountain and there were no clean utensils to cut the cord, the physical separation from the feeding cord would be done with sharp rocks that could be found in the adjacent terrain. In general, the umbilical cord has been cut using two pieces of rock. One piece was placed under the cord and the other hit the cord, particularly in those cases where birth assistants were not prepared and did not have the right tool for the childbirth process. In some other cases, an ax or adze was used to cut the cord.

After the child was born, the messenger bringing the news of the birth during the next day was entitled to name the child, i.e., to become the godfather of the child. While it was common practice that the godfather placing the crowns on the heads of the bride and the groom in the church would give the name to the newly born, the messenger was strong

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with south-westerner folk poet Lefter Çipa, on August 11, 2012

competition. This was, however, an unspoken and unwritten rule. The name is usually inherited from one generation to another in the southwestern coast of Albania. It is inherited from the first child of the couple, especially when the child is a boy, which would be named after his grandfather or great grandfather, unless the name had not already been inherited. An interesting rule of this tradition is that the name would be given to the first male born in the kin, while other males were not entitled to be named after eldest man in the kin, whose name had already been given to a child. Thus, the first born baby enjoyed all the rights.

A variety of wishes were common, but southerners never wished “May the child live 100 years!”<sup>10</sup> One of the most interesting wishes is humorously expressed in a folk song:

*Ky miku që erdhi, rroftë / është djalë sidoqoftë / vuri një shoqe poshtë.<sup>11</sup>*  
(*May this newly-arrived guest live long / after all he is a male / he will have his own girlfriend*)

Instead, they wished “may he live as long as the rock!”, because rocks are everlasting. Even when the rock burned, it would turn into lime and then again into a rock. It lived eternally.

The custom of heralding the good news to the family was the most favorite for all, because the reward for the news was very generous, particularly when the baby was a boy or when the family would finally rejoice with a long-sought child. The messenger bringing the news to the anxious family, to the father, mother, or closest kin, would be rewarded with a ram, goat, or a golden coin, which locals called ‘napoleon’, a former French 20-franc gold coin. Other gifts for such good news included a big bell for sheep or cattle, a shepherd’s pipe, etc. Competition for disseminating the news was very tough: everyone tried to bring the news of the birth of a baby boy. When the baby was a girl, no one ever cared to spread the news. Only the direct family would be interested to learn the news.

The post-birth days were among the most joyous and happiest for the entire family, which paid special attention and great care to the newly-born creature and the new mother. Everything was provided to them for their comfort. The confinement period lasted 2-3 days. A burning candle or lantern was placed by the baby’s cradle to provide light during the day and night. Once the lying-in days were over, the new mother with her baby would go to her original family to stay there for about forty days. During her stay at her parents’, the new mother would never leave the house so as to avoid evil eye, according to pagan rites. Furthermore, any items, such as dishes, clothes, etc., used by the baby and its mother should never be outside the house after sunset. In the evening, old women in the house danced the confinement dance. Local tradition, also found elsewhere in Albania, had old women dance around the baby and its mother three times. This rite and other practices mentioned above were used to get the newly-born creature accustomed to the worldly system. Interestingly, this dance was recorded by Gustav Weigand in Elbasan in 1937.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Interview with south-westerner researcher, folklorist and member of the Piluri Folklore Group, Mr. Kristo Çipa on August 8, 2012

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Academy of Science of Albania, Institute of Folk Culture, Folk Lyrics IV, Tirana 1990, p. 39 – 40, (Albanian Edition)

In the coastal village of Iljaz, north of Saranda, while she was in labor, a young woman saw a big snake sliding down from the laths of her house. Family members did not kill the snake, but burned some old cloths to produce smoke in order to make the reptile go away. In such cases, locals said the baby would be fortunate. This type of snake was called ‘copperhead’ in Laberia.<sup>13</sup>

On the third night, the baby’s cradle was watched over during the entire night by the new mother, her parents and grandparents. The baby’s father was also part of the night watch, which prevented the ‘angels from coming to take the baby away’. While attributed to the tradition, this watch was mostly linked with the safety of the baby during its first days of life. Any family member willing to take part in the night watch was welcomed to do so, but the new mother and father were definitely part of the practice. They would stay awake all night long expecting to hear a word from an angel who would tell them how long the child was going to live. During this watch, various aspects of imagination and psychology of the watchers were combined. Watchers rejoiced when they heard or claimed to have heard a bird’s chirp, when they would see a butterfly or firefly flatter its wings inside the house. Other optimistic signs included the bark of a dog implying a secured life for the baby and a neigh of a horse meaning joy in life. When watchers were displeased with the night watch, they would express their fear with the meow of a cat or the cry of an owl, which implied a short life for the child. Yet, these fears were never expressed openly. These signs and rites are quite similar to those of the neighboring areas, such as Laberia and Kurvelesh.

Other objects placed by the baby’s cradle were, in addition to the burning candle, a lantern or something that produced firefly-like light, and incense (such as pinewood resin). The pre-Christian tradition of light and burnt cloth was placed with the Christian ritual of light in the room where the baby and its mother were accommodated. Some objects put under the pillow in the baby cradle included a knife, scissors, a small scythe, etc., according to the gender of the child. According to the southwestern tradition, on the third day, “these objects would determine the destiny of the child.” This could quite well be the reason of the celebration of the ‘Feast of *Bukanike*’ or ‘Feast of Bukevale<sup>14</sup>’ –as it was called in Laberia– on the third day. All children of the clan and village would participate in this ritual celebration. Two boys from the kin would break the cake on the baby’s cradle and then hand out pieces of the cake to all attending children. Once this celebration was over, the big party was about to start for the baby’s entire family.

An important aspect of the post-birth period included the feeding of the baby and its mother. Great care was taken of the mother, because she had to be able to breastfeed the baby. So much attention was paid to breastfeeding that any sign of decrease of breast milk or, even worse, loss of milk, was considered a great concern or misfortune. Various rites were practiced for this purpose and they included singing of blessings, prayers, songs to scare evil

<sup>13</sup> S. Rusha, *Himara në stuhitë e shekujve*, (Himara in the Tempests of Centuries) “8 Nëntori” Publishing House, Tirana, p. 19

<sup>14</sup> According to the Albanian Present-Day Dictionary, Bukevale (or Bukanik in southwestern coast of Albania) was a type of cake made of wheat flour mixed with butter and sugar in hot water and baked in open fire. This type of cake was served to guests in the first days of the newly-born baby.

spirits away, etc. When in trouble of securing breast milk for the baby, the new mother would ask for help from older women, particularly from her mother-in-law or older sisters-in-law. They comforted the young mother about this problem, giving her pieces of advice on how to increase the quantity of breast milk or on how to regain it or on types of food the young mother was supposed to consume in order to be able to breastfeed her baby. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, family members would take to a water spring the new mother who did not have breast milk for her baby. The concerned mother would carry a piece of bread and cheese in one hand and a freshly-cut fig branch in the other. The new mother would eat the bread and cheese at the water spring, would drink water from this source, and would break afresh the fig branch, out of which latex dropped. This entire rite was practiced with the hope and wish that breast milk would come back and the new mother would be able to breastfeed her baby, her new love, the joy of her entire family.

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