

## **GODPARENTS AS SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OR JUST A RELICT**

**Jehona Hajrullahu**

“Albanological Studies Center” Tirana, Albania, E-mail: [h\\_jehona@hotmail.com](mailto:h_jehona@hotmail.com)

**In Albanian culture families with godparenting relations were once widespread, but today many are left only as a relic of the past. According to the Code of Lek Dukagjini "Godparenting is Saint" is a connection where families together celebrate weddings and funerals, befriend but between these two families marriages are not allowed to be made. Cutting the umbilical cord, give a name, cutting infant's hair and nails for the first time, all these elements once thought to have had a protective function which then directly or indirectly determine the fate of human life.**

**Not always the role of the godmother was a real act. Cutting the umbilical cord was in many cases done only symbolically, whereas naming the infant, or cutting its hair and nails for the first time clearly shows the role of a concrete action, and important position and special treatment of the godmother in Albanian families.**

**These rituals are associated with the child cult for health and fate. Families with godparenting relations used to share gifts which once were almost the same. For the birth of a son gifts were greater in number, whereas lower for a daughter. Nowadays it all depends of the economic conditions the family has when buying presents for especially a new born child. So, exchange visits between these families used to be quite often, but that with the passage of time and changing of socio-economic circumstances, the exchange of visits faded if not disappeared.**

**What has remained and has been carried to the day is the ritual of cutting the hair and nails, and rarely naming of the baby. Godfather and godmother, were persons who were selected due to a special virtue, hoping that the child will inherit it. At the same time godmother and godfather had special privileges, but at the same time they were obliged to have access to the family and some extra obligations that not all others used to have. We cannot deny that the issue of spiritual inheritance was not studied in the context of what Albanians had as their tradition, but we cannot say that we have had studies as to why this tradition is fading. So, today when we have a “limited” tradition, we lack the studying and researching of the causes and reasons of this tendency of “forgetting” the role of godmother and godfather. I think that we have enough space to tackle this issue, perhaps to understand which are the reasons that these elements are not conveyed and preserved to the present days.**

***Keywords: Ethnology, spiritual heritage, tradition, modernity***

## **Introduction**

Families with godfather relations in Albanian culture have once been quite popular, whilst today they remained only as the relict of the past, such relation due to the Canon “Godfather is saint” and celebrate weddings and deaths together, so they are fraternized, but between two families there will be no marriages. Godfather is of three types: godfather of the hair, coronet godfather and cradle godfather. Due to the Canon, the most important godfather was the one who cut the hair. There are taken the childhood hairs, children became Godchild and Goddaughter, man became godfather, and women godmother. (<http://www.vargmal.org/lg/dan1242>)

The role of Godmother, once with the umbilical cut of the infant not always have been a real act, in many cases it have been symbolical, whereas naming, or cutting hairs or nails of the infant for the first time clearly shows the role of concrete action, and important position and special treatment of the godfather and godmother once in the Albanian family in Kosovo. The umbilical cut, naming, haircut and nail cut for the first time, were ritual actions by godfather and godmother, such rituals it was believed to have had the protection function which directly or indirectly determined the destiny of the human being for good health.

## ***Godmother***

Godmother has the special role being participant during the birth of the infant who also did the cut of the umbilical, but not always she fulfilled this epithet, as the umbilicus in many cases have been cut by women that have been a part of the act of birth, instantly, whereas named as godmother in those cases only fulfilled her formal nomenclature. Godmother selected by the family of the infant, since was not a part of act of umbilical cut; she fulfilled her obligations toward the infant as her godmother by bringing gifts such as clothing to the baby and other family members, meanwhile to the woman (mother) after the child-birth brought food. Meantime, by field informant we have learned that in Drenica there were two godmothers.

Named godmother in this region, was the woman who touched the baby the first, whereas named godmother was also the selected woman by the family the one who will put on clothes to the baby

(clothing was symbolical, because the infant were not clothed until a précised age, whereas the ritual is called as such, until the godmother bought as a gift those clothes to the baby).

The baby for the godmother in the event of cutting the umbilicus , but also than when godmother did her clothing of the baby, is named godchild(boy), whereas goddaughter (girl). But, in the catholic community, godchild or goddaughter have to do with christening by godfather or godmother. So, the researcher Mehmet Rukiqi, explains that the word “godson”, comes from the word godchild, that expresses a certain territory of the church that has mainly to do with child’s christening. Godmother, baby clothing ritual, in the region of Drenica, according to the information was mandatory within the period of 1- till 7 year. So, so-called godmother has an obligation that for seven years to buy gifts to the child that have cut the umbilicus or that only have dressed him/her (clothing gifts) in his/her first birth year, as a selected person by the family of the baby. Clothing the baby for the first time after the birth, by godmother, according to the field researches is said that it would be performed , not earlier than the third day after birth day, in the region of Lapit and Gallapit, the same action is performed also in the region of Drenica and also in the whole Kosovo (Informants: Mehana Xh., Krasniqi F., Maxhuni Gj.,:2013) Moreover in the years when Albanians were in poor socio-economic conditions, the number of woman that accompanied the godmother to clothe the baby were maximum 2 attendants, whereas later, in more advances economic conditions, the number of accompanists was bigger which does the so called ceremony “godmother” more impressive.

But, today we can just mention that a word “godmother” exist, in the sense of that selected woman, as it used to cut the umbilicus of the infant and clothing her ( giving gifts to the baby). So, we conclude that currently in this time the godmother does not possess the whilom role, since the socio-economic advance have oriented people toward medical science, since the births now are taking place in maternities, excluding when the birth is urgent (cannot arrive to the maternity), and those cases are quite seldom.

Unlike of what we talk about the effacement of the “godmother” epithet, but something remained from the past that has to do with the organized ceremony for family joy on the event when a baby births, the growth of the family, is non evanescence, but the transforming of so called godmother ceremony, that today is differently organized by nomenclatures such as: “Mevludi”, “Xhymaja” and “Babina”.

### *Naming the baby*

The name in Albanian culture has special meaning considering as a relation with destiny, life and health of the baby, so emphasizing the protective function, as well excluding also the manners and different following forms that used to be for naming the baby, that gives a magical meaning to all this process. In general in Kosovo is mostly said as “to give a name to the baby” or “set” a name to the baby, whereas christen has a religious ceremonial character. For such cases are mostly chosen special godfather, especially catholic to christen a baby in church (for the boy comes godfather and for girl comes godmother) (Krasniqi M., 1979:72). The christen of the baby, due to the faith, is one of the manners to prohibit the death of the babies (Xhemaj U., 2003:172). Hereupon, to the newborn is given a totemic name, or also christening with three candles including here the christening of children with names that represent lifetime.

Although the name to the baby was given by grandfather or grandmother, brother-in-law, uncle or any other relative as well as parents of the baby, in some cases the name for the baby gave selected people from the family called as godfather and godmother, whereas the christened newborn baby is called: godson when it was a boy and goddaughter when it was a girl. There existed also the naming way of the newborn due to the name of the person who was a guest when the baby was born in “big night” in religious events, and the baby used to take their name (this naming manner came from Muslim believers). By heard explanations from the old people of some ethnographic regions of the Kosovo, such as North of Pristine, in Llap- Gallap, in Drenica, Karadak and other regions, the naming of the babies, in Albanian community was done in different ways from the earlier forms where the naming were followed with some rituals, such as from a passenger on the street when than he became a godfather of the child, or the naming with candles, and many other actions which varied from region to region. Hence in most of the cases, but not always it was done a division in genders basis that for naming a boy man decided (males), whereas for naming a girl it was done by woman. Names of the Albanians most of the cases are inherited (renewed) than when a baby usually takes the name of the grandfather, grandmother, uncle. According to the researcher Mark Tirta inherited names were mostly retained by the father’s family side than mother’s family ( Tirta M., 2003:426). This has its explanation with the patriarchal organizing that

gave the importance only the growth number of males and their heritage, whereas female element was not fairly taken under consideration.

The belief that the name will project to the baby till the maturity, the moral and spiritual values of the previous person possessing it have been mutual for all Indo-European population. Earlier evidences regarding the name of the lifeless forefather, has been collected by G. Hahn, in the region of Tepelena : “According to the custom, the boy was named the same name as his grandfather and, to the girls the same name as her grandmother” (Lajci B., 2007: 175).

When Albanians greatly started to get educated, the renewing of the name began to fade and such cases were sporadic. The educational advance of the Albanian population made to change also the approach for the baby’s naming, where names were mainly Albanian from vegetal, animal world, historical figure names excluding here the religious names. Due to the respective religion the dead babies shall be named, too, because if the baby dies without name, dies with sin, which will be reduced only on the event of putting the name. To the baby the name should be given also in those cases when it is born dead because the sin is the same. Therefore, in such cases, naming the child is done in different ways in Drenica, for example, naming the dead baby was done silently but confirmed for the name is decided to be the same name that the pregnant women decided to give the name to her child (Informants: Kajtazi H., Albanologist,;2013). Meanwhile, in Rugova, the naming of dead child beside parents, it may be someone else from the family to put it (Lajci B., 2007:174) It was sin that the baby to stay for a long time without a name because he/she should have been named after two or three days after the birth, say old people in the north part of Pristine (Informants: Reqica Sh., Osmani R.:2013). While informers have explained the manner of naming the children from the ancient time among Albanians, nowadays the reality changed, since the naming of the child is done without any ceremony and name is almost in all cases to the child by one of the parent. In some cases a wish is accomplished by a close family member, and hardly ever to the child is given a name from a favourite or respected person. But now, we express the reality of nowadays where we have a reversion in the past in order to renew the names of our ancestors.

What remained form the particular of the past transferred in today is the ritual of the haircut, nail’s cut of the baby for the first time, the process of a strong godmother relation between two families. Certainly

that those situations represent the development and surviving of those popular customs that through them is realized the relation between two families, and moreover represent a direct relation with the life of that child and social life in that place.

Godmother and godfather, were selected people by family of the child for any particular reason, with the hope that the child will heritage his/her goodness, such as wise, wisdom, fairness, education or also the intellectuality.

It may happened that the godmother to be of a different religion, for example, Muslims make godfather one of the catholic family, continuity of a friendship between two families of different confessions which exist also nowadays. The first haircut of the child from godfather or anyone else that substituted him has had the purpose to integrate the new individual in human intercommunity (Papleka N., 1999:67). The ritual for haircutting was done during the first year of the child, but the nail cut is done earlier maybe in the first week after the birth. When we discuss about the nail cutting we have a broader time limit of the action since there didn't exist strict rituals time for the moment of nail cutting. This ritual is performed when there was a need to cut nails of the baby. An occurrence which is identified in whole practice of godfather relation from the tradition is understood that first haircut in all cases is done from male-godfather. Otherwise, superstition of a haircut is – that to the baby is cut the unhealthiest (poor health) (Pirraku M., 1978:138).Whereas in the event of cutting nails of the baby, this practice have been differentiable, while in many cases it was also done by any female person. But it remained hypothetical, such practice when for haircut is selected only male and at any reason female. I never could slake the curiosity at any reason during the field research why is this practice applied, while anyone could testify in any manner this selection. However, my personal suppose, hypothetic, related to the fact of patriarchal mentality fact where the physical and mental force of a male have been undiscussable and never tantamount with female gender. Such traditions with patriarchal content are present also in nowadays where the hair cut again belongs to the male himself and never to a female. Moreover remained without being cleared the fact that why godfather – haircutting of children is heritage and practiced the same nowadays. Maybe in this case we can discuss regarding the whole inheritance brought also nowadays, while in other cases of rituals we have deviation from the past.

Being privileged as selected to be a godfather of any child in different family, godfather in the same time have had responsibilities, always on investing in keeping healthy relations in order to fulfil the epithet of a privileged godfather. As well godfather – godmother had also other responsibilities, but short term regarding the gifting in the particular moment, during and after applied ritual- child's haircutting that has become 1 year old.

We cannot deny that the spiritual inheritance issue is not studied in the contest that what was Albanian tradition, but, we cannot say why this tradition is “fading”. So, nowadays, when we have a “limited” inheritance, reason's studying and research is missing and reasons of this tendency of “forgetting” the role of godfather and godmother. I think we have sufficient freedom to beck this issue, maybe in order to understand the reasons that some of those rituals are not transferred in nowadays.

## **Bibliography**

- Krasniqi, Mark, *Vestige and research*, The Institute of Albanology in Pristine, Pristine, 1979 Lajçi, Bashkim, *Ethnological research*, Peja, 2007
- Meçi, Xhemal, The Cannon of *Lekë Dukagjinit*, Puka's variant, taken from internet, (<http://www.vargmal.org/lg/dan1242>)
- Papleka, Ndoc, *Cult, rituals, magic in oral tradition: studying*, “Toena” Edition, Tirana, 1999
- Pirraku, Muhamet, Albanological Research, Folklore and Ethnology, IAP, VI-1976, Pristine, 1978
- Tirta, Mark, *Albanian's Ethnology*, GEER, Tirana, 2003
- Xhemaj, Ukë, *Albanian's ethno culture in Podgur: ethnology monograph*, The Institute of Albanology in Prishtina, Pristine, 2003