

# **ARTISTIC VALUES OF CUSHION COVERS IN THE MEN'S CHAMBER - HIGHLANDS OF GJAKOVA**

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The paper is focused on the study of a distinct artistic aspect of the cultural and artistic heritage of the Highland of Gjakova, which is also included in the author's doctoral studies. It will particularly examine two elements that complement the furnishing and design of the men's chamber in this province. They are pillow and mattress covers, which not only have a certain function, but traditionally they also contain distinctive decorations. The main focus of the paper will be on the compositional models of decorations, the colour preferences which are traditionally used in these decorations, the variety of the ornaments and the distinguished aesthetic and symbolic atmosphere that these artistic elements create in the men's chamber. The men's chamber or the guest chamber, as it is known otherwise, reflects a rich tradition of hospitality found throughout Albania. In this context, the men's chamber in the highlands of northern Albania are not only characterized by the rules of the tradition of welcoming guest, but also by the aesthetic, artistic and symbolic elements found of bed sheets and cushion covers inside the mountain tower. These elements are very important for the place, where the guest is received and thus honoured.

Studies in this area have undertaken starting from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To begin with they have been generalist studies of the Albanian traditions and the step by step they have been oriented towards regional characteristics. To write this paper, works from well known anthropologists and artists have been consulted. They include Rrok Zojzi, Andromaqi Gjergji, Llambrini Mitrushi, Ikbal Bihiku (Mustafa) , Afërdita Onuzi, Andon Kuqali, Agim Bido etc (see bibliography). On the other hand, general and thematic albums concerning Albanian folk art and ethnographic archives of IAKSA QSA have been consulted too. I will have to include that living and working in the Tropoja district, as well as my degree in artistic textile, have helped me in furthering my research concerning the topic of the paper. In addition to this, ethnographic expeditions in the Highlands of Gjakova (in Albania and Kosovo) during the past two years have been of great importance for my scientific research. Part of the conclusions in this paper will take in account the tradition of receiving a guest, in a contemporary perspective, as well as its implication in cultural tourism. On the other hand, the conclusion will shed light on the artistic representation of this tradition in the works of professional artists regarding textiles and paintings.

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The first feeling you experience when you observe traditional cushion and mattress covers of the Highland of Gjakova is that of an unusual artistic effect. Whether observed in a men's chamber, or photo slides, the covers can create the impression that they have been embroidered. In fact they are woven on a loom (*vek*) by masters of traditional arts in the area. You are attracted straight away by strong contrasting colours and their combinations; the compositions of ornaments and their symbolism. Let us briefly analyse the three characteristics mentioned above.

## **1 – Recurring colours and their combinations**

The cushion covers of the Highlands of Gjakova (in Albania and Kosovo) are characterized by a basic background of a dark colour (*shtrrojë e murrm*). This feature is related to and characterizes, in the extent of its use, the tradition of the making of mattresses and cushions in the province of Has which usually have a traditional yellow colour (*shtrrojë e lulz*). On the dark background of cushions from the Highland of Gjakova, are traditionally combined 2 or 3 main colours, in particular the strong red (*bojë alli* or *bojë gjake*), the strong contrasting blue and the bright yellow with a tint of orange. These three basic colors harmoniously complement the cushion sheets of the men's chamber and are in artistic concordance with the floor area on both sides of the fireplace (*margëza*) where guests and master of the house sit.

It is very remarkable the way that the masters of traditional arts implement the distribution of these colours across the lower part of the men's chamber, which is complemented by various tapestry (*sixhade* and *qilim*) and cushions placed around and in front of the fireplace. What gives elegance to this traditional environment is also a kind of luminosity of the colour pigments in the woollen material. It is rather frequently that models mattress and cushion covers, from the province of Has in the Highlands of Gjakova, the decorative creations resemble contemporary visual art in the field of textile. Hence it must be appreciated as a precious element of Albanian tradition.

In view of the broader concept of the colour system studied, we can say that the cushion and mattress covers, but also in the cradle sheets, there are three main colour combining systems: dark colours and purple-blue, dark colours with purple-red and dark colours with orange-yellow. Within these basic systems, the masters of traditional arts of the Highlands of Gjakova, apply, to a lesser extent, the additional variety of colours such as white, dark and light green, blue, light brown with a tint of orange (*bojë brogji*), light violet (*bojë bube*) and others. The observations mentioned in this paper are accompanied with the relevant illustrations.

## **2 - Compositional patterns**

It is worth pointing out that the greater diversity of compositional patterns is observed in the woollen cushion covers of the men's chamber in the Highlands of Gjakova. It is my belief that this comes as a result of the large number of cushions placed on the three sides of the chamber where the guests and the master of the house sit. The number of cushions varies from 15 to 20 pieces and it is usually preferable that all cushions, where lie, have "*their own faces*". This means that it is intended to have different cushion covers with various decorations, but always within an overall harmony. In this sense, the men's chamber seems like it is "rejoicing" for the coming of the guests through the colours and decorations of cushion covers, along with symbols present, tapestry, the fireplace and wood works.

Observing the many patterns of this tradition in the Highlands of Gjakova makes us come to the conclusion that there are three main models implemented on the cushion covers: a) the three-part composition of the decoration, b) the model with a central and two lateral patterns, and c) the model with a less rigid decoration.

Mattress covers, on the other hand, are large (about 2m x 1.60m). Their decorative composition is distributed in three sheets joined together in home-made looms. Because of this we usually find three sheets joined together with the same pattern of decoration. But there are cases when the middle sheet varies from two lateral ones. The masters of traditional arts can explain in detail the technique of dyeing wool, the colour preferences, as well as the implementation of geometric motives using the loom. But they cannot explain compositional patterns used. They would simply reply: "These models and patterns are the legacy of our ancestors as well as an addition of something of our own". I believe this is what characterizes traditional art. It is passed down from generation to generation of craftsmen, not only in the family but also in professional artisans in the bazaars of Gjakova, Prizren, Shkodra etc.

### **3 - The variety of ornaments and their symbolism**

Concerning the diversity and the symbolism of ornaments and decorative motifs of cushions and their woollen covers, in the Highlands of Gjakova, it may initially be said that they are influenced by their realization techniques on the loom. Therefore, they contain geometric patterns as a result of the particular techniques used in their implementation. This is the reason why, at first hand, terms used by the masters of traditional arts, defining the patterns used, seem incomprehensible like "*talisman (hajmali)*", "*Solomon's ring (mhyri Sulejman)*", "*with zigzags (me sakica)*", "*oak tree with branches (lis me rrema)*" or "*hand print (pika doroshe)*". This last motive is preferred in decorating mattresses and veils of women.

These kinds of motifs complement the look of ethnographic object, as well as their covers. It is important to note that in the centre of cushions, you can often find variations of images and symbols of the eagle in geometric forms. The composition concerning the eagle motifs, can either be two eagles facing each other, or many eagles flying one after the other. In general, the borders of the cushions are simply decorative geometric elements. The symbolic ornaments are usually found in the middle of the cushion. The function of this part of the cushion containing symbolic ornaments is so it may be placed on both sides of fireplace

of the men's chamber, where the master of the house and the oldest guest sit. The conversations that took place in the men's chamber would often naturally revolve around the symbolic ornaments.

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I think that the artistic value of cushion and mattress covers complement the aesthetic and symbolic function of the men's chamber in the Highlands of Gjakova. They are an inherited fortune, which should not only continue as such, but also develop and be included in the wider contemporary cultural tourism in Albania and Kosovo.

On the other hand, in addition to museum networks, illustrative publications and the rebirth of tradition, especially the folklore, cultural heritage values have been and continue to be part inspiration for professional artists work on paintings or textiles. Well-known painters such as Abdurrahim Buza, Ismail Lulani, Zef Shoshi, Naxhi Bakalli, Adem Kastrati, Avdul Berisha and other artists, have included in their works this almost modern decorative feature of textiles and clothing from the Highlands of Gjakova and wider. In this context it is worth mentioning the works of the following painters; Abdurrahim Buza, "Wedding from Gjakova" oil painting, 1979, and "Traditional games" , oil on canvas 60x90cm; Ismail Lulani, "Muji and Halil", oil on canvas, and "Qerime (Shote) Galica" 1974, oil on canvas; Zef Shoshi, "Isa Boletini with warriors" 1982, oil on canvas, 46x86cm; Naxhi Bakalli, "The resistance" fresco, 18.4x5.6m, Museum "Gj.K.Skenderbeu" in Kruja; Adem Kastrati, "Traditional costumes" dust colours on canvas, 102x92 cm, etc.

Besides the museum networks that have begun to be set up in the city of Bajram Curri, in Gjakova, in Kukës, in Prizren and villages surrounding these cities, it can be noted that the tradition of the men's chamber, including that of decorative cushions (the object of this paper), has started to be applied in hotels in order to attract tourists interested in the traditional culture of the nation. These traditional elements are even being applied in the open air in places like Isniq, Kosovo, and beyond (see illustrations). At the close of this paper, I would like to express the opinion that artistic and symbolic values of men's chamber in the Highlands of Gjakova and beyond among Albanians are a never ending source for cultural tourism and visual arts.

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The traditional aesthetic ordering of the men's chamber in the Highlands of Gjakova in front of the fireplace. On both sides of the fireplace (margëza), one side for the guest and the other one for the master of the house, there are cushions surrounding the sofas and on the floor there are various forms of tapistry (cerga, sixhade, postiqe and qilima).



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Various cushion covers in the men's room. Photo by H. Danjoll.





The attractive layout of the men's chamber in the courtyard of a house - Isniq, Kosovo



Babinë (Tropojë) - Photo by I. Balaj





Cushion covers with symbolic motifs of the eagle and sheets of various colours for decorating the men's chamber in the Highlands of Gjakova.  
Photo by H. Danjoli





Matress and cushion covers decorated with rich ornaments, where you can see compositional motifs in their sheets. Photo by H. Danjoli



H.Danjolli. Project for for mural tapestry. “Our besa, avalanche of freedom” .  
Gouache on canvass, 165 x 218 cm. National Arts Gallery 1982. G.K.A. Tiranë



H.Danjolli. Project for for mural tapestry. “The goddess of Kosovo” , acrylic on canvass, 100 x 80 cm. 2012