

Xhubleta: A heteroglossic visual space of narratives

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Abstract

Xhubleta is a traditional dress of the communities of North Albania. A significant aspect of the dress is the visual language of the embroidered patterns on it, and this paper aims to address the visual aspect of them. They have been continuously modified, invented, elaborated by women bearers and subject to their subjectivism, thus shaping different and simultaneous denominations. Comparing the denomination given by the bearers with those given by non-bearers, it is observed different points of view influenced by cultural context, worldview, and interpretations shaped by present-day ideologies propagated through mass media and dominant historical narratives. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and the work of A. Smith, this paper argues that the embroidered patterns in xhubleta cannot be simply interpreted as reflections of a historical past, as some non-wearers might wish to interpret them today. Instead, these patterns represent heteroglot, multivoiced realities wherein contradictory meanings of past and present converge within the xhubleta. The fieldwork was conducted in North Albania from 2019 to 2021. In-depth interviews, quantitative observations, and online questionnaires constituted the primary methods used in the analysis. The fieldwork data was then compared to ethnographic accounts provided by Albanian ethnologists, and further supplemented by artefacts and visual data to enrich the analysis.

Keywords: xhubleta, embroidered patterns, bearers and non-bearers, heteroglossia

Introduction

Xhubleta is a traditional Albanian dress of the Northern Albania and represents an interesting artefact for ethnological studies in terms of its craftsmanship, cutting, sewing technique, as well as the patterns embroidered on it.¹ Xhubleta has a characteristic volumetric shape, wavy and static, and consists of several parts: the skirt (which is also

¹ In November 2022, xhubleta was inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. See, UNESCO. 2022. *Xhubleta inscribed on the list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding* (accessed: 14 May 2024).

called xhubleta), the short vest, the belts, the aprons, the shirt, the headpiece, other parts, and several silver filigree accessories. Based on its structure and morphology, Albanian ethnographers classified xhubleta as one of the five typologies of the traditional Albanian dresses.² Nowadays, xhubleta is not worn in everyday life, but only on festive occasions and ceremonial events. Its craftsmanship is preserved only by a few old women, who make portions of the dress, but not the whole of it.³

Due to the high interest that xhubleta attracts in academic discussion as well as in the general public, xhubleta and the patterns embroidered on it, have been interpreted as dating since the prehistoric times. The analysis and interpretation of xhubleta has been compared to ancient Cretan culture and to Danubian culture, and also based on the archaeological findings in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴ Various Albanian scholars, among them A. Gjergji, stated that “xhubleta is a dress with a thousand-year tradition that represents an ancient dress on the shores of the Mediterranean that managed to survive in a limited area, such as in the Highlands of Northern Albania”.⁵

The analysis of xhubleta was not only carried out on its structure, but also on the “ancient” genesis of the embroidered patterns, which are also the focus of this paper. Because of its ‘indecipherable’ nature, xhubleta has been defined as a dress that carries mysteries, and its antiquity is an evidence of the national ethnogenesis and national historical identity. The patterns are embroidered on the back of the skirt, on its apron and on the short vest. Some patterns are part of the local tradition and heritage, such as zoomorphic and geometric ones; symbols, such as the sun or the snake; and patterns that bearers have inherited from generation to generation or recreated by themselves. Each bearer expresses her worldview, thoughts and narratives constantly recreated, offering a lexical and visual polysemy. The corpus of the embroidered patterns differs from one xhubleta to another. They have been continuously erased, modified, invented, and elaborated by women bearers, thus shaping different and simultaneous interpretations and denominations of the patterns.

Comparing the denomination of the patterns given by the bearers with those given by non-bearers, different points of views are simultaneously observed. To the bearers of xhubleta, the patterns are narrative forms and interpretations concerning to their cultural context and world understanding. While to the non-bearers, the patterns are interpreted and associated with the interpretations of the present ideologies acquired from the mass media and the hegemonic representation of history and heritage.

Borrowing Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia,⁶ and A. Smith's work on heteroglossia and collective memory,⁷ I contend that the embroidered patterns in xhubleta represent a visual space of polyphonic reality that activate heteroglossia in their interpretation, both at the visual and lexical level, by both bearers and non-bearers.⁸ The embroidered patterns are a result of the interactions between bearers, where multivoices with different artistic and historical consciousness, collide and coexist with the present and the past ideologies.

² Zojzi, Rrok. 1965. Mbi veshjet tradicionale të popullit tonë. *Studime historike* 4, 143-158; Gjergji, Andromaqi. 2005. *Veshjet shqiptare në shekuj: origjina, tipologjia, zhvillimi*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore.

³ The woven felt was processed in watermills by men. The wool was firstly weaved on a loom by women, and then it was passed to the watermills to be processed by the men. See further, Nini, Silvana. 2013. Technology Preparation of “Xhubleta.” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2(8), 646–652.

⁴ Various scholars have written about the antiquity of xhubleta, such as: Gjergji, *Veshjet shqiptare*; Nopcsa, Ferencz. 1925. *Albanien: Bauten, Trachten und Geräte Nordalbanians*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

⁵ Gjergji, *Veshjet shqiptare*, 135.

⁶ Bakhtin, M. Mikhail. 1986. *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Bakhtin, M. Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁷ Smith, L. Andrea. 2004. Heteroglossia, “common sense,” and social memory. *American Ethnologist* 31(2), 251-269.

⁸ Bearers are the individuals who carry the tradition of a community through their knowledge, transmission, craftsmanship, safeguarding and customs. I claim as non-bearers those individuals who are not part of the community and who do not possess the craftsmanship of making xhubleta.

I also explain that the embroidered patterns in xhubleta cannot be read as a deliberate interpretation of an historical past as non-bearers wish to interpret them nowadays. The embroidered patterns of xhubleta are subject to change to the subjectivism of women bearers. The patterns can be articulated as heteroglot realities where contradictory meanings of the present and the past are located in the material visual space of the dress, and as such, they do not have a fixed meaning.

In this perspective, the interpretation of xhubleta's patterns cannot be analysed as an expression of an isolated, fixed artistic consciousness, within a historical continuity framework, as a monolithic truth, and according to the ideologies of the present. As we will see below, each bearer represented ideas of the historical-social context in which she lived; the belonging and her role to her family and clan, the belonging to the social class, her local culture, community, etc. To the bearers of xhubleta, the patterns are narrative forms and interpretations concerning to their cultural context and world understanding, while to the non-bearers, the patterns are interpreted and associated with the interpretations of the present ideologies acquired from the mass media and the hegemonic representation of history and heritage.

Figure 1: Xhubleta of Malësia e Madhe



Source: Photo by author

Figure 2: Xhubleta of Dukagjin



Source: Photo by author

Women, social context, and cultural environment

There are two main variants of xhubleta covering two main geographical regions.

The first variant is widespread in Malësia e Madhe (north of Shkodra), in some parts of Montenegro, in Velipoja, island of Lezha, island of Shëngjin, in some villages of Zadrima and in Rugova in Kosovo.⁹

The second variant is what is called “xhubleta pultake”, and it is found northeast of Shkodra (Dukagjin, Pult, Shllak and Temal), and in a part of the district of Puka up to Nikaj-Mërtur.

Most of the parts of xhubleta were crafted by women, taking between several months and up to a year. Nowadays, only a few old women continue to craft some parts of the dress, but not the whole. The changes during the period of Socialism, as well as the changes after the 90s, upon the arrival of the pluralist system, have had an impact on xhubleta crafting.

The geographical location, terrain, and the harsh climate in the Highlands of Albania were factors that influenced the isolation of the highlands, dictating limited communication, and forms of cultural isolation of a certain degree.¹⁰ Community and tradition bearers who transmitted their knowledge and skills depended on orality as the primary key for the transmission of tradition and the semioticisation of reality. Writing is a means of communication, but also an orientation towards knowledge and reality’s interpretation,¹¹ constructing a common sense of reality on the bearer and in the representation of it.

⁹ Gjergji, *Veshjet shqiptare*; Onuzi, Afërdita. 2021. *Xhubleta*. Tirana: Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe Studimit të Artit; Bido, Agim. 1991. *Arti popullor në veshje e tekstile: Malësitë e Shqipërisë Veriore*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Republikës së Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore.

¹⁰ Zojzi, Rrok. 1962. Ndarja krahinore e popullit shqiptar. *Etnografia shqiptare* 1-3, 16-64.

¹¹ Ashcroft, Bill / Griffiths, Gareth and Helen, Tiffin. 2003. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London: Routledge; JanMohamed, Abdul. 1983. *Manichean aesthetics: The politics of literature in colonial Africa*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press; Goody, Jack. 2010. *Myth, ritual and the oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Young women did not receive an education, and most of the population was illiterate. Women's life activity was defined within the economy and family obligations. Life in a patriarchal society limited the woman in active participation on her family and community. The *Kanun*, which was the set of norms of Albanian customary law and orally inherited, defined gender roles in the community. Women had limited rights and were subordinated to family, clan, and community. In the *Kanun*, it was stipulated that the girl does not have the right to choose her own destiny, and she did not even have the right to choose her "shoes and clothes".¹² Men enjoyed more of the public space, and they were subject to the official dress culture. Their garments were more unified and subject to hegemonic representations of personhood. Women's traditional dresses were richer in details, especially the ceremonial dresses, and varied from village to village. Since the dress is the primary sign to express feminine domain involved agency, women embraced innovation, influence, fashion trends, and were subject to individualism, too. So, dress became an instrument to express self-narratives and subjectivism.

In social and linguistic terms, women constituted a group that was distinct from men in many aspects. This is an aspect that is noted also in the denomination of xhubleta's patterns rising from personalisation. Based on the need to visualise and depict the inner world, xhubleta represented "the space" to express them visually, and perhaps for this reason, the embroidered patterns, still today, are often referred to by women bearers as "letters" or "flowers".

Figure 3: Different patterns on xhubleta. The figuration of the eagle embroidered on the belt



Source: Photo by author

¹² Gjeçovi, Shtjefën. 2001. *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*. Tiranë: Kuvendi; Ulqini, Kahreman. 1989. E drejta kanunore shqiptare përballë të drejtës kanonike dhe shariatit. *Etnografia Shqiptare* 16, 65-82.

Figure 4: Patterns embroidered on the socks of a xhubleta



Source: Photo by author

Figure 5: Zoomorphic pattern on the back of a xhubleta



Source: Author's photo

Figure 6: Various patterns on the belt of a xhubleta



Source: Author's photo

Figure 7: Geometric patterns on the small apron of a “*Pultake*” xhubleta



Source: Photo by author

The process of acquiring and transmitting the patterns

The patterns for embroidery were borrowed and transmitted through observation, by means of a paper cutting technique. Since that xhubleta’s craftsmanship implies also the artistic skills of the bearer, a part of women who had the gift of drawing and tailoring also had the ability to create a pattern according to their will. Although, in both cases it is still necessary for the bearer to have creative artistic abilities.

Through observational learning, by observing their mother or another woman, the young girls learned how to make xhubleta and its patterns. They used to observe, memorise, and then mimic the process. The bearer observes the embroidered pattern on a xhubleta, and seeks to reproduce it in exact way, or otherwise make a new one, by distorting, enlarging, adding or removing parts.

The transfer of patterns with paper cutting has been evidenced by ethnographers during expeditions in the 1980s. Even today, women who inherited the craftsmanship, are knowledgeable of the technique. The transmission of the pattern through observation is the most immediate method, and it also favours the interpretation of it according to the bearers's ability to copy, reproduce or make a new one.

During the transfer of the image through the cutting paper technique, the pattern goes through a desemantisation process, which is applied both to the image and its meaning and name.

During this “liminal phase” of transfer, new patterns are created, and new names are articulated as well. Women abstract the image, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, which gives flexibility to its interpretation. The more abstract the pattern, the more interpretations arise and the more flexible is the possibility to name the pattern. From one woman to another, the continuity of the visual reference goes on, but at the same time the possibility of interpretation and naming continues and expands. The need for individuality and personalisation favours the opportunity to change the pattern.

Figure 8: The paper cutting technique.



Source: Photo by author

Figure 9: The paper cutting technique. The pattern obtained from this technique is a mirrored image.

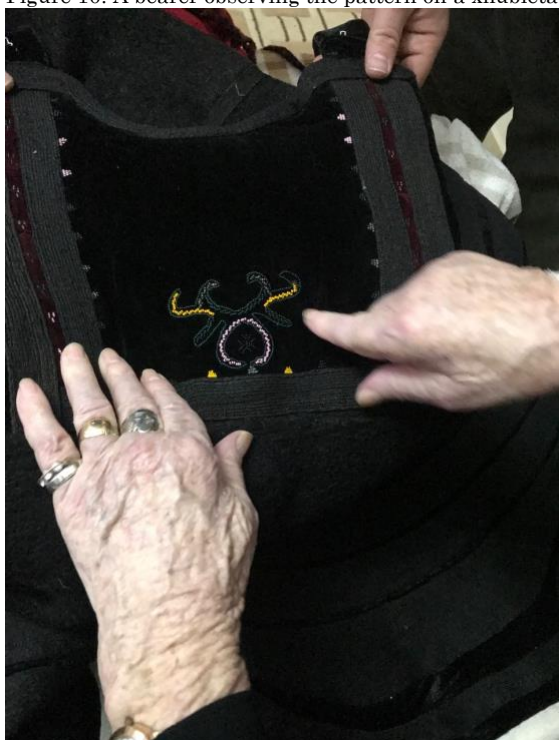


Source: Photo by author

After completion of the pattern, the bearer sometimes attaches a name to the picture. From the one bearer to the next, personal and other interpretations are conveyed. Patterns are read differently from person to person. And the act of interpretation of patterns by the bearers and non-bearers, is the other aspect that affects heteroglossia in the denomination and in the interpretation of the patterns.

Because of the motif realisation process, many bearers do put their names according to their wishes and according to the possibility they have to contextualise the image with a denomination. A pattern might have many names, due to the multi-meaning and “multivoices” that are beared by the figuration. In other occasions, the patterns that are created instantly from the bearer itself do encourage several options; the figuration might be without a name or it might take on a new one. Thus, on the entirety of these patterns, their denomination and interpretation are ‘polyphonic’, containing different ‘personal voices’ and not a common sense in pattern interpretation.

Figure 10: A bearer observing the pattern on a xhubleta



Source: Photo by author

Figure 11: The realization of the pattern with the paper technique after observation. As it can be seen, the paper pattern is not the same to the embroidered pattern.



Source: Photo by author

Voices of the bearers: xhubleta's patterns according to them

During the fieldwork, bearers often have conveyed different interpretations about the patterns. Sometimes they invent the names, sometimes they have a clear name for them while living others without a name, and some of them represent personal and family narratives while others bear mythological names that relate to the local memory and clan tradition.

Further, the bearers have stated that certain zoomorphic figures were often placed on certain parts of the body, such as the scorpion embroidered on the front part of the vest, for protective effects against the evil eye; the snake embroidered on the socks; the filigree eagle placed on the leather belt; or the 6-pointed filigree star placed on the headpiece and in front of the vest.

Some of the names that ethnographers have found are: “*crab flower*”, “*knife patterns*”, “*swirl with swag*”, “*moon hook*”, “*foot flower*”, “*flying bird*”, “*talisman with crab hooks*”, “*chicken legs*”, “*snake flowers*”, “*chicken flowers*”, “*fingers with all the slap*”, “*hornbeam flowers*”, “*xhubleta with three lights*”, “*written light*”, “*writing at will*”, etc.¹³ During fieldwork, I have come across names such as: *heart flower*, *flower with fingers*, *flower like leaves*, *postava flower*, *three lights*, or *nameles*.

Woven narratives of personal stories

The motifs on the textile have always had an important role for the articulation of power, kinship, religious belonging, origin, taboos, and gender roles.¹⁴ In this way some patterns that were embroidered on xhubleta have been forwarded from mother to daughter in order to represent the tribe and family affiliation where, according to legends, “a girl had to embroider on a xhubleta the family ‘flowers’” or the figurations according to the clan affiliation, which consisted a rule.¹⁵

As it is known, women have been part of the narratives articulated by the communities about them, and on the other hand, women created narratives communicating through the dress as an intermediary to express their inner world.¹⁶

Agim Bido, in his 1986 ethnographic reports, documented the story of a bearer from Dukagjin area of Northern Albania. The conversation between them went as follows:

Voice 1: “It is my world”

Bido: “*How long did it take to make a good xhubleta?*” *That of the bride and that of death? Did it take a year to do it?...*

Bearer: *YES! I really worked hard, day and night, when I had to. At that time we had neither radio, nor television. I used to put in front of me my mother's xhubleta, and I used to take the flowers and patterns from it...I talked to them! It is my WORLD;... the world of my family, my clan and my husband. It is like talking to the other world!!.... I talk a lot with the dead, embroidering different flowers!...*

Bido: *Did you copy them? - I insisted.*

Bearer: *NO! I took flowers, patterns, BUT always, everyone added something by themselves! The same will happen to my daughter's xhubleta!*

¹³ Agim Bido, an Albanian ethnologist, during his expedition in the 1980s, in the North of Albania encountered several patterns, which he accompanied with photos and illustrations.

¹⁴ Schneider, Jane. 1987. *The Anthropology of Cloth. Annual Review of Anthropology* 16, 409–448.

¹⁵ During an interview with the collector L.Dano, she stated that a bearer could distinguish the clan's patterns embroidered on xhubleta.

¹⁶ It has been widely discussed the production of narratives and the network of associations closely linked to gender roles, space, language, power, and authority. See, Chico, Tita. 2005. *Designing women: The dressing room in eighteenth-century English literature and culture*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Steele, Jeffrey. 1991. The call of Eurydice: Mourning and intertextuality in Margaret Fuller's writing, in *Influence and intertextuality in literary history*, edited by Clayton, Jay and Eric Rothstein. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 271-297.

Xhubleta has always been closely connected with the cultural setting and the *forma mentis* of the natives, where parts of this cultural context have been related to the mythological stories, *vallja e shpatave* (the dance of the swords), *vallja e Logut* (the dance of Log), the rituals and customs and *cikli i kreshnikeve* (the valiant's cycle).¹⁷

During the fieldwork, I noticed that some bearers did not want to express themselves regarding the stories about xhubleta and mythological figures such as the fairies. They would discuss about them only on certain moments, expressing themselves with reservation.

Voice 2: Lucia, “Back then dragons were mentioned and discussed more”

Lucia is 62 years old, originally from the village of Bzheta in Malësi e Madhe and today lives in Shëngjin. Her mother was from Ulcinj and used to wear the xhubleta. Her mother wanted to be buried in xhubleta, but she donated it to the museum, after xhubleta was worn out. When she was married Lucia was dressed in xhubleta, which she borrowed from her relatives just for the wedding day.

In my house, by our customs, it was said that fairies appeared to us in several beautiful forms. They were so beautiful that people used to pursue them. People saw the faires wearing xhubleta. I have heard about it from my family.’

While Lucia started talking about dragons, she said to me: *‘My mother used to tell me that the dragon, stayed next to you and he was a normal person, and at the same time, he stayed next to you and he was a dragon. The dragon was known, he was a man of the neighbourhood, a simple man. The dragon was embroidered on xhubleta because it was a symbol. At that time, dragons were mentioned and discussed more’.*

Voice 3: Agia “The fairies wore xhubleta, too”

Agia was born in Tale, and lives in Shëngjin. She was married with xhubleta. During the interview, I asked Agia, if the fairies wore the xhubleta. Agia was stunned and straightened up. With an restrained and spent voice she said: “Yes, the fairies wore xhubleta, too. They brought it to us. I can’t say much about it.” she said smiling.

Voice 4: File K. “Don’t know what I am doing”

File is 70 years old and she was born in Vermosh and married in Velipoja. File knows the craftsmanship of xhubleta and makes many of its parts. From the age of seven, her grandmother forced her to learn xhubleta-weaving techniques. To her, as a child, the black colour always remained a mystery, while from a young age she was amazed and curious by the embroidered motifs. In her dowry, File inherited eight xhubleta, while on the wedding day she wore the xhubleta worn by her grandmother and mother. Today, she is transmitting the craft to her daughter.

F: There are many types of patterns.

E: What about these, do you cut these at will? Do these patterns have names?¹⁸

F: *Postava’s flowers*. Xhubleta’s flowers are cut longer, in another fashion. Xhubleta’s are longer, those of *postava* (belt) smaller.

E: Ah, yes, I get it.

F: I don’t know what I am doing (laughs). There, the shape is appearing just as I want it.

E: And the cutting technique how did you learn that?

F: The patterns have always been cut with papers, because back in the old days there were neither pencils, nor other things as we have now. A woman knew how to cut it. The model was made exactly as she saw it made from someone else.

Voice 5: Drane R. “An invented flower”

¹⁷ Karuni, Kelmend. *Mysterious symbols of Xhubleta - Misteret dhe historiku i xhubletës Shqiptare* (accessed: 14 May 2024).

¹⁸ In this article *E* is used as an acronym for ethnographer.

Drane is 77 years old and lives in Tamarë, Malësi e Madhe. She was married when she was 17 years old and wore xhubleta. In her dowry she had another one made by herself. She knows all the techniques of xhubleta making.

D: One can embroider these even on the apron (pështjellak).

E: What is this flower called?

Drane: This flower... (Thinking and perplexed) a flower invented, “*as with fingers*”, “*as with heart*”, “*as with leaves*”. This can be embroidered even on the apron.

E: Can you put name to it? Or is it nameless?

D: There is no name for it! I invented it.

I try to ask here again.

E: What does it look to you like? Sometimes they had names.

D: How can I explain it to you?! We used to call them leaves... “*Tree leaves with fingers*”, “*tree leaves with fingers with veins*”. We tried to draw them with leaves images; wherever we saw them we tried to copy them somehow.

Voice 6: Tola B., “*There is no name! No name, because I did it.*”

Tole, born in 1927, is one of the oldest bearers of xhubleta. Born in Kastrati in Malësia e Madhe, she has been living for decades in Tuz in Montenegro, where she got married. Tole makes xhubleta-s in her house. She has sewn xhubleta for artists, in various nationwide festivals, as well as for Albanians of the diaspora. Tole is also concerned with the "rescue" of the xhubleta from destruction, by restoring them. In the interview conducted with Tola, I asked her about the name of the paper-cut pattern.

T: Nobody taught me how to make xhubleta, the need taught me. Everyone came to cut her own papers. Not everyone knew how to do it. God doesn't give the gift to everybody.

E: Where did you learn to cut the paper patterns?

T: A woman who knew how to cut the papers came from Kelmend. I saw her do it and afterwards I began to cut them myself. Till I got married I didn't know how to do the technique, but I learned afterwards.

Tola continues to cut the paper.

T: First the figure is imagined on the paper, and then you draw it down over it. I have not cut paper since a while. I make the flowers on the spot. This one used to be put on the belt, this other on the socks.

E: What is this image?

T: What can it be?! It is to be fixed on the belt; it has no other name! These cannot bear names! This is a pattern for the apron. It can't have a name. There is no name! No name, because I did it!

After I asked her if she could gift me that pattern and she answered: “Yes, but if I knew you wanted it, I would have made to you a more beautiful one.”

Figure 12: Tola cutting the paper for the pattern. She didn't give a name to the pattern.



Source: Author's photo

Figure 13: The *Nameless* paper pattern made by Tola

Source: Photo by author

Dialogues among bearers

Denominations of the patterns vary not only between women but also between women and men. As it is argued by scholarship, the lingual distinctions between men and women are reflected through vocabulary.¹⁹ Gender lingual distinctions (genderlects) are noted on different lingual styles and in the goal of the communications where women who try to negotiate relationships using the self-discovery.²⁰

During the conversations the bearers show different attitudes and interpretations in the denomination of the patterns. They had situated interpretations regarding the patterns that resulted from the conversations with each other or even with me, or even regarding the manner how they knew *xhubleta* and how much they knew about it.²¹ At certain moments, the same bearer could give different denominations for the same pattern, and this depended on the presence of other speakers or even their desire to lead the discussion on a certain interpretation of the pattern.

File N.

File lives in the Muri Turkut, on the mountain area of Shllak (Dukagjin), in the Zbuq neighbourhood. She was born in this village, and she is 68 years old. File has an old type of *xhubleta*. From her mother she inherited only the skirt, which was sewn by her grandmother and the belt made by her mother. As her mother left her at a young age, File does not remember her mother wearing the *xhubleta*. But she remembers her grandmother who used to wear it.

File never made a *xhubleta*. She never married. Thus, she knows very little about it or maybe doesn't want to talk about it. I understood this, because during the interview, File spoke about it from time to time with a sort of hesitation that gave me the impression that she had "forfeit it her right to talk about *xhubleta*". I was impressed when File showed me

¹⁹ Andreatta, Susan. and Gary, Ferraro. 2017. *Cultural anthropology: An applied perspective*. Toronto: Nelson.

²⁰ Wood, Julia and Natalie, Fixmer-Oraiz. 2018. *Gendered lives*. Boston, Massachusetts, United States: Cengage Learning; Berisha, Naim. 2020. Vështrim etnolinguistik mbi leksikun e të folmes së grave në Rrafsh të Dukagjinit. *Albanologjia International Journal of Albanology* 13/14, 96-99.

²¹ Situatedness is a theoretical position used by psychologists, philosophers, cognitive scientists, etc. *The theory of Situatedness posits that the activity of the mind (in all its cognitive, emotional, perceptual, and social capacities) is in the relation to bodily, social, environmental, and cultural interactions, as an expression of the complex and dynamic interaction between the agent and the social world*. Vygotsky, Semyonovich. 1980. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Lindblom, Jessica and Tom Ziemke. 2003. Social situatedness of natural and artificial intelligence: Vygotsky and beyond. *Adaptive Behaviour* 11(2), 79-96; Costello, Matthew. 2014. *Situatedness*, in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, edited by Teo, Thomas. New York: Springer; Frank, Roslyn / Dirven, René and Tom Ziemke. 2008. *Sociocultural situatedness*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

the inherited xhubleta, stored in poor conditions while kept in the chest. "I left it behind in a bad box. I didn't want it," File told me.

Ismaili

Ismaili and his family live in Muri Turkut, in the mountainous area of Shllak, and around twenty minutes on foot from File's house. During the interview, he talked about his sisters, 87 and 75 years old, who were married wearing xhubleta. His cousin knew how to cut patterns, a craft she had learned from her grandmother.

Bardhok

While I was talking with File and Ismail, Bardhok, who lived next to File's house, joined us. He occasionally interjected into our discussions by commenting on some elements of xhubleta.

At first File addressed all the patterns as "flowers". Afterwards, while I showed her again some of the motifs that were drawn by A. Bido, File said: "*They are just beautiful. My mother cut them by hand. My grandma knew how to cut the papers and so did the aunty.*"

Showing another pattern, I asked her: "Does this look like a bug?"

F: *No, I don't know what to say. They did all of them with papers, as they have not gone to school and had seen them drawn elsewhere. Those of Malësia e Madhe were smarter, they knew how to cut the papers.*




Ismaili, just as File, calls the white stripe that is found on the lower end of xhubleta "troll". They both agree just on a few denominations such as: "*felt stripe*", "*velvet stripe*" and "*spiku stripe*". Bardhok, denominates the patterns on the apron as "*in between letters*".

When I asked Ismail to name the drawn patterns, he didn't name them the same as the women. He denominates them as: "*xhubleta's necklace*", "*xhubleta's pendant*", "*xhubleta's silver stripe*", "*xhubleta's apron stripe*", "*neck pendant*", "*belt's silver*".

Ismail and Bardhok named the patterns by mapping them according to an anatomical logic of the dress, and based from the materiality of the textiles. Both Ismaili and Bardhok named them with an improvisation and on the spot.

On the bearers one can feel a distinction among the elements of inner and local signs and the outer ones, making a classifying division among that which is produced within their locality and that which is produced outside it. To my question, "*What is troll?*" Bardhok firmly answered that: "*They (those who lived outside the Turkish Wall area, my emphasis) have other words. We don't know them!*"

Table 1: Denominations of patterns made by women and denomination made by men

Patterns	Denomination of bearers (women)	Denomination of men (bearers)
	The moon with stars	Belt's silver
	Mountain snake	Xhubleta's apron
	Bug	Neck pendant

Source: All the tables made by A. Bido are used with author's permission

Dila V. and Drane R.

Dila lives in Tamara and is the president of a cultural association that organises cultural projects in Malësia e Madhe in the framework of “Logu i Bjeshkëve” festival, aiming to safeguard and promote xhubleta and the practices related to it.

While Drane begins to cut the paper in order to make a pattern, Dila speaks about motifs and their meaning.

E: Will you make the pattern at will?

Drane: Yes.

During the conversation she continues to cut the paper with certainty.

Drane: This belongs to the belt.

E: Does it have a name?

Drane: It's a pattern!

Dila enters in the conversation and says:

Dila: This is a silver button.

E: Is this what was called “xhubleta's flower”?

Dila: No! “*These are the flowers of xhubleta*” and shows the silver ornaments on her xhubleta.

Afterward I ask Drane if she can cut a collar motif, showing to her the silver star on xhubleta.

Drane: It is indeed difficult to cut the star.

She becomes pensive for a moment, sees it and takes the paper and begins to cut.

Dila: These were used against the evil eye. For example, the scorpion was fixed on the collar so one wouldn't be targeted by the evil eye.

She comes near the collar and shows to Drane a decorative element made of filigree and asks her:

Dila: Is this a pattern of a scorpion?

Drane: Yes, it is a bit.

Dila: Yes, a bit.

Dila speaks to me: “It is not at all easy to remember and to make the flowers at this age”.

Drane keeps cutting the paper while improvising. She is not able to cut the shape of the star for it is difficult to her. After she finishes it, she says to me: “*Now, this is the collar's flower*”. She carries on with the other parts and keeps explaining to me. “*This was placed on the collar. It was drawn with chalk, embroidered with beads and thus the pattern was made*”.

Politics, mass media, and heritage

In Albania, during the 50-year socialist period ('45-'90), the Albanian school system, following the guidelines given by the policies of the time, was oriented toward the study of culture and people as a combination of the historical materialism with the founding myths of the "National Renaissance" period which led to what is called "National-Communist" myth. During this period, the discovery of myths of ethno genesis and historical glory, based on the myth of sacrifice and resistance to the enemy that culminated with the advent of the communist system, served to build the nation's history by mythologising it.

In this approach, xhubleta, as an important artefact of Albanian heritage, was analysed as dating since to the prehistoric times and its antiquity was an evidence of the national ethnogenesis and historical identity.

The “*imagined homogeneity*” and the process of ethno genesis of Albanians on the basis of Illyrian-Albanian continuity were reflected in the project idea of the National Historical Museum in Tirana.²² The main content lines of the topic of the formation of Albanian nationality were in the pavilion of Prehistory - Antiquity - Early Middle Ages that were

²² Giakoumis, Konstantinos. 2019. *Politika pragmatiste mbi kujtesën dhe harresën*, in *Mes apatisë dhe nostalgjisë: kujtesa publike dhe private e komunizmit në Shqipërinë e sotme*, edited by Godole, Jonila and Idriz, Idrizi. Tirana: Instituti për Demokraci, Media dhe Kulturë (IDMC).

displayed by including the sector "Albanian ethno genesis (VII-XII centuries).²³ In this exhibition space, among other artefacts, xhubleta is displayed connecting its history to the Koman Culture.²⁴

After the '90s, upon the arrival of the pluralist system in Albania, material culture, which had often been the main axis of the narrative of socialist politics, underwent changes. The period of the political transition also had an impact on the ethnographic objects. Various cultural artefacts, part of a family's wealth, were devalued by being sold at low prices. The preservation of private artefacts, as an important part of national identity, was cast aside and seen as a past to be forgotten.

The period after the 2000s marks a stable phase which begins with the rebirth of the desire to return to tradition as an important identity value. In this perspective, different factors played a role in the re-evaluation and revitalisation of heritage objects in the perception of the masses, such as: press, mass media, collecting artefacts, tourism, and the Albanian Diaspora. As can be seen in the scholarship, mass media shapes the perception of national identity building, collective belonging, communal identity, and the perception of the past, becoming important for the production of shared meaning and the fabrication of culture.²⁵ In this approach, the past, national heritage, and their interpretations was mediated through media discourses, the collections of artefacts, and tv personalities,²⁶ thus becoming relevant sources for reconstructing, circulating, and disseminating knowledge on mass culture. The collectors and the mass media played a special role in the interpretation of Albanian heritage, ethnographic artefacts and especially the xhubleta. They played a role in orientating and "dictating" its interpretation on the eyes of the masses.²⁷

In 2007, the collector L. Dano published the book "The Goddess Athena and other Cosmogony Symbols", about the decorative system of xhubleta,²⁸ and the documentary film "The Mysteries of Albanian xhubleta", scripted by her, was released in 2009. Today it remains as the documentary with the widest impact on xhubleta among the general audience, reconstructing and influencing the collective imaginary.

According to the collector, xhubleta has several cultural symbols of the Mediterranean like: *the solar rosette, stars, the Chthonic Serpent, Double-Crested Eagle; Cosmic Egg; Tree of Life; Scorpion, Infinity; Zeus Symbols, The Triple Leaf of the Sacred Oak symbols of the Minoan culture, as well as the Goddess Athena, DNA strands, sound waves of the Milky Way galaxy, etc.*²⁹ According to her, the symbolism used in the decoration of the dress has a high cultic function representing ancient and prehistoric myths.

Other collectors, also, have said that the elements of xhubleta are a coded ancient book, "belonging to a culture of an ancient population."³⁰

²³ Giakoumis, *Politika pragmatiste*, 47-59.

²⁴ The Koman culture, which lies in the area of Puka, is defined as a key historical-archaeological moment, where Albanian scholars have argued the transition from the Illyrians to the Arbër. Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, *Historia e popullit shqiptar*.

²⁵ Hall, Stuart. 1977. *Culture, the media and the "ideological effect."*, in *Mass communication and society*, edited by Curran, James / Gurevitch, Michael and Janet, Wollacott. London: Routledge, 315-348.

²⁶ Garde-Hansen, Joanne. 2011. *Media and memory*. United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.



²⁷ Spitulnik, Debra. 1999. Media. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9(1/2), 148-51; Hall, *Culture, the media*.

²⁸ Dano, Luljeta. 2007. *Perëndesha Athina dhe simbole të tjera kozmogonike*. Tiranë: Ideart. Dano founded in 2009 the "The Anthropological Centre Xhubleta", aiming to exhibit, preserve private collection, to undertake further research on the Albanian cultural heritage, and education in Albania.

²⁹ Dano, *Perëndesha Athina*.


³⁰ In an interview a collector, stated that "troll was made out by special women, whom she calls them "priestesses", by specific families who had a special status, knew the craftsmanship but also had the right to produce it". See the interview, Karuni, *Mysterious symbols*.

Table 2: Some patterns and the denominations made the collector

Patterns	Denominations of the collector
	The Goddess Athena, four Snakes and the swastika
	The Goddess Athena

Source: Luljeta Dano. The photo is used with author's permission

Table 3: Collector's interpretation and the non-bearers' denominations

Pattern	Collector's interpretation	Non-bearers' denominations
	The eight-pointed star of Alexander the Great	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A flower A Letter The sun It has no name Illyrian abstract figures Different motives, I do not think that they are defined in a single one A composition of flowers and leaves The sun and snakes The universe with the sun in the centre of it Forms of energy The cosmos A desire for pregnancy

Source: Luljeta Dano. The photo is used with author's permission





Voices of the non-bearers


During my first fieldwork about xhubleta in 2019, in the area of Shllak (Vau i Dejës), I began to have my first questions about the embroidered patterns on xhubleta. There I realised, that many bearers did not have a fixed idea or name for them.

I noticed that a bearer could name a figure or not; a figure could have different names for different bearers; and the bearers had situated interpretations about the patterns. Thus the question arose, that if the bearers do not define the names of the patterns in a fixed way, how could the non-bearers have knowledge about them?

In this way, I developed an online questionnaire to collect quantitative data about them, where I present a summary of them as below.

Table 4: Denominations made by the bearers and denominations made by non-bearers

Patterns	Denominations of the bearers	Denominations of non-bearers
	Heart flower	Mountain snake Snake flower Eagle Bug Flower with eyes Heart flower I can't name it It has no name
	Flower with eyes	A bug Flower with eyes Heart flower A letter The fingers with full slap An abstract figure House with a roof or mountain ridge Deer antlers It is not defined A crown Illyrian symbols (unknown meaning) Energy, Spiders, Decoration The stars and moon I don't understand It's a kind of pyramid with a hole in the middle The energy movement in the solar system Part of the shoulders of the Highlander woman Scorpion
	Flower vest	I can't name it A figure made with embroidery Vest flower The sun The cycle of the sun and the four seasons A cell, the creation of life, the basis of life A cross A seed The conception, an embryo, the beginning of life A cell or a galaxy of the universe, the solar system with planets, a kind of life's cycle
	An eagle	A mountain snake Snake flower An eagle Heart flower A letter Writing at will It has no name

	Nameless	The sun An eagle I can't name it
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Source: All the diagrams made by A. Bido are used with author's permission. The last illustration of the table is a diagrama made by the author of the article.


In the development of questionnaires and interviews with non-bearers, there is a lack of a consensus regarding the denominations of the patterns. Due to the difficulty of articulation and deconstruction of their meaning, everyone interprets the signs in a different manner.

The figurative vagueness causes a lexical vagueness, which is a prerequisite to cause referential variations according to each person favouring an infinity of names.³¹ The names that non-bearers attach to the patterns are different from those of the bearers, but they are quite similar and referential to what they have learned from the mass media.

Non-bearers manage to define a pattern within a mental scheme, attaching a name to it.³² For example, the eagle, which is embroidered as a totemic, but also as a national symbol, has a low polysemy, and non-bearers relate it to the Albanian flag. The pattern made by Tola, which was nameless, was interpreted by the non-bearers and named as an eagle. Abstract figurations have a high polysemy, because they are independent from the common visual context.

Through the personalisation of patterns that bearers do, flexible references are created, a thing that enlarges their meaning, thus favouring an infinity of names.³³ The lack of a any cominalityin naming the patterns activates perplexesities that arise from what non-bearers know, from what they have seen on documentaries, and read on books, like for example, the documentary about xhubleta. The media, television and social networks have been playing a role in the collective imagination and in the naming activity that non-bearers perform.


Table 5: Some patterns, illustrated by A. Bido in the '80s (in Malësia e Madhe and Dukagjin) with their denominations, and compared to the denominations of patterns recorded by the author during 2019 (in Dukagjin), and to the denominations made by the non-bearers, recorded by the author in 2020

Patterns illustrated by the ethnographer in the '80s (Malësia e Madhe and Dukagjin)	Denominations of patterns recorded by ethnographers in the '80s (Malësia e Madhe and Dukagjin)	Denominations of patterns recorded by the author during 2019 (Dukagjin)	Denominations of patterns of the non-bearers, recorded by the author in 2020
	Mountain snake	Xhubleta's belt	Vest flower Mountain snake Snake flower It has no name Foot flower Xhubleta's flower

³¹ Zelinsky-Wibbelt, Cornelia. 2000. *Discourse and the continuity of reference: Representing mental categorization*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

³² Koffka, Kurt. 2013. *Principles of Gestalt psychology*. London: Routledge.

³³ Zelinsky-Wibbelt, *Discourse and the Continuity*, 100.

	Bug	Necklace	<p>I write for fun Written light Bug</p> <p>If you turn it to the other side, it looks like Thot (<i>the Egyptian god</i>) An insect</p> <p>A bird or other insect other than a bug</p> <p>It looks like an insect, but it could be an extraterrestrial thing</p> <p>I don't understand "Kuceder."³⁴ An eagle Omega</p>
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Source: All the diagrams made by A. Bido are used with author's permission

Conclusions

This article attempted to address some interpretations that are associated with the patterns drawn on xhubleta from the bearers. As mentioned above, the visual aspect of xhubleta shapes different and simultaneous interpretations of the patterns, to both bearers and non-bearers.

The embroidered patterns of xhubleta carry within them interpretations, lexical just as visual, that are consequential from the bearers who have passed them through generations or even as a consequence of the need to change and interpret new patterns according to their wishes. The fieldwork testified that the major parts of the patterns are subjective narratives and interpretations, through which the bearers have expressed their cultural setting and world understanding. Between representations of the individual agency and collective representations, the patterns on xhubleta are continuously erased, modified, invented, and elaborated, thus shaping different interpretations for each bearer. Furthermore, the corpus of patterns represents the clash between the individual artistic performance with the local tradition and the common sense, shaping not only a variety of understanding, but also of denomination to different persons.

During fieldwork, I noticed that the interpretation of the patterns differs from those who are non-bearers of xhubleta, although they recognise it as an important national element of Albanian heritage. On the questionnaires and interviews with non-bearers, contradictory narratives and different points of views were simultaneously observed, interpretations that often were related with what they had seen or read on the media.

It is true to say, and as it is well explained by various scholars, that there exists a complex relationship between image and words which makes a room for interpretations to be reflected, voiced, communicated, moved or re-interpreted.

The well-known cultural theorist, Aby Warburg, in his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* [Mnemosyne Atlas], articulated his theories about the migration, repetition, and the survival of the images, expressing the heterogeneity, contradictions and the tensions that arise.³⁵ According to him, images are charged with meanings and have life and history, closely related to the culture and memory of a society. Despite this, his theories are associated with iconology; they are just as valuable for the life and biography of image. Images are subject to perceptions and diverging interpretations.³⁶

On the other hand, xhubleta is an artefact and as such, it has a biography. Just as many other authors like Glassie, Appadurai, Kopitoff have argued, the artefacts have a life of

³⁴ A mythological figure of Albanian folktales depicted as a large snake with two tills to thirteen heads.

³⁵ Ohrt, Roberto and Axel, Heil. 2020. *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The original*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz.

³⁶ Pedersen, Christina. 2021. *Crafting collaborative research methodologies: Leaps and bounds in interdisciplinary inquiry*. London: Routledge.

their own.³⁷ As Glassie wrote: “*The artefact belongs to spatial experience. It unfolds in all directions at once, embracing contradictions in simultaneity, and opening multiple routes to significance: its reading is expanded in a space that involves different contexts such as creation, communication, and consumption.*”³⁸

In this view, xhubleta and the patterns that are embroidered in it can be read with different lenses from different readers who interpret it according to their cultural context and their relation to xhubleta. For bearers of xhubleta, a certain pattern can be a flower, an insect, or it might be even nameless, while for the non-bearers the same pattern can be read very differently from the interpretation made from the bearer.

In this manner, xhubleta holds within it “many voices”, where the interpretations of the present do not coincide with those of the past. The visual representations of the embroidered patterns often are not a deliberate interpretation of the past, but they are representations of the present and the past located in a material space where meanings are contradicted, articulating various forms of dialogue, interactions, and subjectivism between people. This aspect of xhubleta, meaning, the lack of a common sense of pattern categorisation and denomination and the interpretations and different ideologies that clash on an artefact causes heteroglossia. For non-bearers, the patterns are interpreted according to their point of view, this being an aspect which associates with the interpretations of present ideologies that are received from mass media and the hegemonic representation of history and heritage.³⁹

Notes on author

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³⁸ Glassie, *Material culture*, 48.

³⁹ Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Brooklyn: Verso; Smith, L. Andrea. 2004. Heteroglossia, “common sense,” and social memory. *American Ethnologist* 31(2), 251-269.

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