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Pastoralist Landscapes as Multifunctional Systems of Interaction Between People and Nature – The Case of Tropoja¹, Albania

Stephan Doempke

UNDP

United Nations Programme for Development

Summary: This article discusses the multifunctionality of mountain pastoral areas, with their economic, ecological, cultural and even spiritual functions. These remarks are based on field observations in the Tropoja region in northern Albania. They show that pastoralism is both the cornerstone of the Albanian identity and a good example of the combination of globalization and bio-regionalism.

Keywords: Pastoralism, Albania, Tropoja, multifunctionality, traditions

Les paysages pastoraux, systèmes multifonctionnels d'interaction entre les gens et la nature

Résumé : Cette communication traite de la multifonctionnalité des territoires pastoraux de montagne : fonction économique, écologique, culturelle, voire spirituelle s'y combinent. Ces remarques sont basées sur des observations de terrain dans la région de Tropoje au nord du pays. Elles indiquent que le pastoralisme est à la fois une pierre d'angle de l'identité albanaise et un bon exemple de la combinaison entre globalisation et bio-régionalisme.

Mots –clés : Pastoralisme, Albanie, Tropoje, multifonctionnalité, traditions

I – Cultural Landscapes: Interaction between People and Nature

The adaptation to, and the modification of the natural environment are a key, or better *the* key cultural activity of man. Since it secures man's survival both individually and as a species, it can be considered to be the prerequisite for any other expression of life.

Characteristic ways of appropriation of natural resources are even key scientific criteria for the definition of basic types of cultures: we distinguish between hunter/gatherer, pastoralist, agricultural and industrial cultures. While this is a useful approach, we should remember that the appropriation of nature is not only limited to its material aspects but includes cultural and spiritual aspects as well.

In this sense, cultures such as pastoralist cultures are multifunctional systems which include people, their natural environment (landscape), the way these two interact with each other, and the mental and material (intangible and tangible) products which result from this interaction.

II – Pastoralism and Ethnic Identity in Post-Communist Albania

The deputy minister for the environment of Albania, Dr. Taulant Bino, remarked at our meeting that the question of pastoralism in Albania is a question of Albanian identity. This question, and what image of themselves Albanians should project abroad, is an urgent one in the post-communist period, and it is far from resolved.

When Albanians talk about their cultural heritage, they mostly talk about the archaeological sites and historic cities on Albanian territory. Few of them are Illyrian or Albanian. The archaeological sites are Macedonian, Greek and Roman, and the historic cities are Ottoman, peoples against whom the Albanians and their Illyrian predecessors fought for hundreds of years. Although most Albanians consider themselves to be descendants of the Illyrians and emphasize their Illyrian identity, Illyrian sites do not play any major role in present Albanian archaeology or in the presentation of Albania's cultural heritage.

Large parts of Albania's coastal areas were almost unpopulated, malaria-infested swamps until they were drained under Enver Hoxha not even 50 years ago, and the few towns on the coast are Greek or Roman foundations securing military and trade routes between Rome, Athens and Byzantium. The Albanian settlements characteristic of this part of the country are fortifications on the mountain tops, witness to the fact that the fertile valleys and lowlands were fought over until only 100 years ago. Behind the passes, in the remote and inaccessible mountain areas, there are no more fortresses. Very few cities can be observed there either, and even the villages are not coherent built-up areas but dispersed settlements. This is the Albanian heartland, and its settlement patterns tell that the traditional Albanian culture is not an urban one: Albanians have been, for most of their history, mountain shepherds.

However, this recognition of Albanian history and culture seems to be deeply unpopular today when the country aspires to be accepted in the family of European nations. Most of its citizens feel that what they have to do for this is to modernize their administration and technological infrastructure, but they pay minimal attention to agriculture and their natural environment. Interestingly, this overlooks the fact that Europe's diversity of cultural landscapes and high-quality agricultural products represent one of its greatest riches and a key factor that makes it so attractive to visitors from all over the world.

The country has not yet recovered from the destruction of the traditional village structures and family farms in the socialist period. Most of the re-privatized lands are too small to be utilized economically, and as a result, Albania's top quality soils are sacrificed for constructing ever more coffee bars, hotels and car washes. Working in agriculture is something nobody wants to do. The olive plantations are largely untended and vegetables are imported from Italy and elsewhere. The mountain areas are depopulating rapidly, and it is only remittances from Albanians living abroad that keep the villages alive.

Although tourism, explicitly including cultural tourism, is considered a priority economic sector, the implications of this for rural development are still little understood among Albanian policy-makers, or at least, this priority is not followed by the action it would require in terms of revitalizing the mountain areas by supporting a healthy agricultural sector and protecting the integrity of cultural landscapes.

III – The Case of Tropoja

The various functions of a pastoralist cultural landscape are explained below and exemplified here in the case of the region of Tropoja in northern Albania. Tropoja is without doubt one of the most remarkable regions of Albania and even of Europe. Its landscape is incredibly spectacular and enormous; it combines largely untouched natural forest vegetation and a wealth of rare biodiversity with a history of settlements dating back to the Palaeolithic, ancient culture and traditions embedded in a transhumant way of life.

Tropoja is a district of 1,043 km² in the northeasternmost part of Albania, with a population of about 28,000 (2006 estimate). It covers the highest part of the Albanian Alps that form the southern end of the Dinaric mountain ranges.

Tropoja is characterized by towering, extremely steep mountain massifs unparalleled anywhere in Europe, rising almost vertically from deeply cut, narrow gorges and valleys at about 300 m a.s.l. to

the peaks at more than 2,000 m a.s.l and reaching their highest point at Mt. Jezerca at 2,693 m. Isolated small scattered settlements can be found on the valley floors and on natural terraces of the steep slopes. A landscape of such monumental proportions cannot but leave an imposing and sometimes almost threatening impression to the beholder. Even a short presence of only a few days seems to have a profound impact on the state of mind of the visitor.

The climate of Tropoja is continental European, with long, harsh winters, cool summers and plenty of precipitation throughout the year. Snowfall starts in late November, and snow cover of 3-5 m blocks the mountain passes, cutting off people in large areas from the rest of the world for several months. The stocks of food for men and animals brought in until then must last until spring, and late snow melts can cause serious hunger.

The natural vegetation is dominated by mixed Red beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and Black pine (*Pinus nigra*) forests, replaced by chestnut in the lower locations. The wildlife of the region includes endangered and endemic species such as the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the wolf (*Canis lupus*) as well as the Balkan lynx (*Lynx lynx martinoi*) and many other rare species. An area of 8,000 km² of the Valbona Valley has been declared a National Park, and plans exist to make almost the entire territory of Tropoja north of Koman Lake, only excluding the capital Bajram Curri (pron. "Bye-rum Tsurree") and the area to the south and east of it a nature conservation area.

Tropoja is extremely remote. Even today, only one small country road enters the region from Albania (from Puka), and most of the motor traffic from Tirana and Shkoder arrives by a small ferry travelling the artificial Koman Lake on a 2½ hour journey. Substantial areas such as the entire Curraj (pron. "Tsur-righ") and Nikaj Valley Systems upstream of their confluence are accessible only on foot or by mule even today. There is no road access from either the West or the North, and the road from Tropoja's capital Bajram Curri to Gjakova in Kosova has been (re-)opened only recently, after the independence of Kosova,. This road gives access to the new Durres – Kukes – Prishtina highway and for the first time provides an uninterrupted main road connection between Tropoja and Tirana.

This situation reflects the fact that the town of reference for the Tropoja people has historically been Gjakova in Kosova². Gjakova was the market for Tropoja products, and the Gjakova plains provided winter pastures for Tropoja herds. However, Tropoja was cut off from its marketplace in 1913 through the decision of the European powers not to include Kosova in the independent state of Albania, adding to its isolation, and it was only connected to the rest of Albania by a ferry line when Koman Lake was created in the 1970s. However, Tropoja's links with Shkoder or even Tirana have always been weak.

With very limited opportunities for agriculture due to climate and terrain, the main economic activity of Tropoja has always been sheep and goat pastoralism in the form of transhumance, augmented by hunting and gathering as well as smallholdings in the valley bottoms and patches of fields and meadows on the natural terraces half-way up the mountain slopes. Shepherds move their herds from the valley floors about 1,000 – 1,500 m up to the summer pastures above the tree line, where they remain throughout the summer and descend in October. Traditional winter pastures were to the North in Montenegro and to the East in Kosova; when these became inaccessible in the 1950s due to political circumstances, the animals were kept in stables and fed with hay throughout the winter. This situation is unchanged today.

Other important features of the cultural landscape are terraces built on the steep slopes, irrigation systems and ancient paths (*shteg*) which connect the villages. *Shteg* are usually built as ravines or run between high boulder walls or fences in order to give protection against enemy attacks.

The entire northern Tropoja region has maintained a completely traditional outlook and archaic way of life. With the exception of small village schools and some kiosks, no shops and no public infrastructure for health, education and administration exist in the entire area to the West and North of the Fierza – Bajram Curri – Kosova road. As a result, the area has suffered widespread exodus,

leaving only the non-productive categories of the population behind. Only the Valbona Valley, because of its better accessibility and proximity to Bajram Curri, has maintained a notable number of inhabitants while most of the other former villages and settlements are either completely deserted or house only minimal numbers of people in winter. With Bajram Curri easier to reach through Kosova, the paving of the Valbona road completed in 2010 and rich Albanians starting to invest in tourism facilities, the Valbona Valley and its branches could soon experience an economic upswing and re-population, but with this faces the imminent danger of cultural levelling which can already be observed in some new construction built in styles entirely alien to the local architecture.

Still, many ethnic Albanians both inside and outside Tropoja would contend that it is only in this region that what they call the “original Albanian culture” has survived. Without discussing here what this would mean, the extreme isolation of this region well into the industrial age, where political factors were exacerbated by natural ones, lends credibility to the argument that Tropoja has been significantly less exposed to outside influences than any other part of Albania. The entire complex of economic patterns, architecture, social customs and practices and cultural traditions has been preserved here, although modified as a reaction to changing conditions of the world around, with an astonishing degree of integrity and wholeness.

IV – Functions of the Cultural Landscape

Mainly because of their crude materialist approach to the world, communists viewed rural areas / landscapes as production zones or resources only. While for other reasons this has partly been, and to a great part still is, the case in the West as well, in Albania the communists’ zeal to destroy traditional (“feudal”) social structures and the policy of collectivization which they applied to execute it, has not only led to the collapse of agricultural production but also to the destruction of Albanian rural culture and way of life as a basis for collective identity.

To revitalize the rural and mountain areas of Albania, it would seem to be essential to establish the recognition that cultural landscapes are multifunctional entities with economical, ecological, cultural and spiritual significance.

1. Economic Functions

The economic functions of cultural landscapes as areas for food production have been mentioned and are obvious, Sheep, goats and cattle provide the essential foodstuffs: meat, milk and blood. The so-called “Tropoja cow” and “Tropoja sheep” are special regional breeds that are highly adapted to high mountain conditions. In addition to food, sheep and goats give raw materials—wool, skins, sinew and bones—for all kinds of domestic use.

However, the cultural landscape has further functions. Other than the industrialized agro-business, it provides a workplace for many people—people who maintain and develop traditional knowledge of the natural micro-conditions, domestic breeds of animals and plants, traditional medicine, practical uses of all kinds of natural materials and their processing.

Furthermore, animal dung fertilizes the pastures and supplies people with heating material on the woodless high mountain grasslands. In pre-industrial times, animals also provided mobility. Horses and mules were used for transporting people and goods, oxen were used to draw ploughs. On steep slopes and roadless areas of Tropoja, they still are, and will remain, the only means of transport.

In Tropoja, animal husbandry is complemented by planting maize, beans, squash and potatoes, as well as growing a variety of plum that is unique to this area.

2. Ecological Functions

The ecological functions of cultural landscapes are less well known. Rural areas balance ecological degradation in the cities: without them cities could not live. They absorb and assimilate pollutants from air and water and serve as sinks for the CO₂ emitted by cars, heating and electric power production mainly in the urban centres. In addition, they act as coolants, countering the heat that builds up in the urban areas and over paved roads.

Furthermore, they have a fundamental function in regenerating soil productivity through the production of humus; they produce and store groundwater (which is often tapped by the cities), and provide the basic framework conditions for the reproduction of species, thus ensuring biodiversity. Biodiversity is often higher in cultural landscapes than in natural landscapes. Through all these functions, they play a fundamental role in maintaining the general stability of the human environment.

3. Cultural Functions

In traditional place-based cultures, it is an obvious truth that the natural environment determines the phenomenology of the self-expression of man, or culture, as can be witnessed in architecture, movable objects and even art. Such cultures would in return develop sets of ethical standards and rules that would make sure that the natural environment is maintained. In the Bible, this idea is expressed in the image of Man as the Gardener who both nurtures and uses the plants that he grows, or the shepherd who both eats and expands his flock. A living cultural landscape would reflect such a positive interaction of man and nature, including the artistic products that express it and the ethical values and spiritual traditions that carry it.

A. Dwellings

The characteristic type of dwelling in Tropoja is the *kulla*, a rectangular house built of boulders and covered with long wooden shingles. It is almost closed to the outside, has defensive features such as embrasures and is usually surrounded by a stone wall or a high wooden fence. A *kulla* has three floors: the ground floor has a stable for the animals as well as a storage room for tools. The second floor is reserved for the women's rooms, the kitchen and household storage, while the third and upper floor is the domain of the men and where guests are welcomed. It usually has a wooden outer balcony in order to let fresh air in, and an inner balcony behind whose wooden openwork shutters the women—who were not allowed to sit with the men—could observe and listen to them, and also notice when they needed to bring them anything.

Villages may also have an isolation tower, a building where men could find protection who had been threatened to be killed as a result of a blood feud. Such towers were built in the same way as the *kulla*, and were called by that word, but had only a very few small windows.

Churches are also built in the style of a *kulla* and can be recognised from outside only because they have only one floor.

Each village also has small water mills that dot the landscape, and even they are built in the same cubic style with boulders and wooden shingles.

With the exception of very few public buildings such as schools and administrative buildings dating from the communist period, no new houses have been built in the Tropoja villages which therefore still have a very high degree of visual integrity. However, the roofs of many abandoned houses fall in one by one under the heavy snow load every winter. The owners who live far away do not come to repair them, and nowadays it is getting ever more difficult to find people who know how to make new shingles—a part of traditional architectural knowledge is being lost.

B. Clothes, designs and patterns

Albania is famous for its rich diversity of traditional costumes that differ from one village to another and from one tribe to another, and Tropoja is no exception in this respect. The clothes of both men and women feature felt, reflecting the sheep-based pastoralist way of life. The white felt hat or *plis* is common to all Albanians and distinguishes them from other nations of the region. All garments are richly decorated with ornaments representing animals, flowers, the celestial bodies or other natural features.

C. The xhubleta

One of the most mysterious features of Tropoja culture is the traditional women's skirt, the *xhubleta* (pron. "joo-bletta"). It is unique in the world and can be found only in Tropoja. The *xhubleta* is a gown with a large bell-shaped skirt made entirely of heavy, thick black and white felt and intricately decorated with embroidery. It may weigh up to 20 kg. According to researchers, some ornaments have cosmogonic references, and although this has not been researched extensively, the appearance gives an impression of extreme antiquity.

D. Objects for daily use

Objects of daily use are made of the natural materials that nature provides, such as large wooden chests to store flour, stone tools and willow baskets. Textile objects such as carpets, pillows and saddle bags are made of wool and again richly decorated with unique traditional designs. Metal or cotton items of are imported.

E. Social organization

Society has been strictly organized along family lines up to the present day. The body of ancient customary law known as the *kanun*, although formally replaced by the state law, to some degree still governs patterns of social behaviour, family and gender relationships and the procedures during important events such as marriages and funerals. Because of a strict exogamic rule, even today very few married women live in the village where they were born.

Another unique social feature in Tropoja is the *burmesh*, or sworn virgin, a woman who assumes a male role in patriarchal society while renouncing marriage and sex. *Burmesh* served a social need in villages who had a lack of men because of war or blood feuds. In present conditions and with a general change of gender relationships, the *burmesh* are also disappearing.

F. Customary practices

Marriage is the most important festival in the life of any Albanian. In the mountains it usually takes place in the fall when the shepherds have returned from the summer pastures. Traditionally, a marriage took three weeks to prepare and lasted for three days, involving both the bride's and bridegroom's entire extended families, so that usually several hundred people would gather. The festivities included games of archery and horse-riding. Even today, Albanians who live abroad come home for their marriage.

G. Music and dance

The dances of Tropoja have their own rhythm and expression. Many of them reflect the shepherd's life, such as the famous "Fierce Ram Dance" which was later introduced in wedding ceremonies. Men usually dance singly or in twos or threes, imitating an eagle's flight or other animals that demonstrate strength and skill, while women have their own dances related to domestic life. Other dances are of a spiritual character and are related to fire and other natural phenomena.

The musical instruments of Tropoja are the same as those characteristic for many shepherd cultures: the flute, the bagpipe and the tambourine, but also the *lahuta* (pron. "la-hoo-ta"), a unique kind of *viola da gamba* with one string, which accompanies epic singers with songs about genealogies, heroes and stories of the past. *Asqerçe* (pron. "us-cher-tse") songs are shepherd

songs in a stricter sense, sung by men's duets. They have short lyrics and are sung loudly in pastures and in the highlands.

4. Spiritual Functions

Cultural landscapes evoke some of the deepest feelings in human beings. It is here that we experience the annual cycle of nature—how life is created, grows and dies. We see abundance, integrity, wholeness. We feel part of creation, and we realize that we are part of something bigger.

The harmonic composition and visual integrity of natural and manmade features of the landscape evokes a strong sense of beauty, and the visible interrelatedness of human life with its natural environment is an image of a world in harmony.

It is here and through this that recreation can be found. Not only are pure food, water and air available, but it is the experience of being in a place so much apart from the rest of the world which makes one forget about the worries and concerns of daily life. Tropoja still offers almost complete silence, and still keeps its own rhythm of time which allows you to come face to face with yourself again and to find rest for contemplation. Although not well documented, many natural sites in the area are held to be sacred, testifying to the fact that Tropoja has been considered a place for spiritual inspiration and a life-giving region.

V – Globalization versus Bio-regionalism

All these functions and experiences taken as a whole make the cultural landscape the subject of our primary territorial identity. It is where we belong, where we feel in a very personal way that it is ours. In a very concrete sense it is the place we call home.

Globalization is the ultimate antithesis of such place-based cultural systems. It tries to pretend that people can live on the move all the time, with their job here and their family there and their boat somewhere else. People around the world are resisting this because it deprives them of an essential part of their lives, a part that makes them human beings. It is well worth considering whether regions such as Tropoja can ever be competitive in a globalized, urbanized economic system or should choose an alternative path of development as symbolized by the concept of the cultural landscape.

When we talk about a cultural landscape such as one created through the agro-pastoralist type of use of natural resources, we can do justice to it only by discussing the whole system of different functions that combine economy and ecology, tangible and intangible aspects, and it is this whole system that needs to be protected and developed. Like very few other regions in Europe, Tropoja represents such a system as a living way of life in its full complexity and integrity and therefore merits thorough consideration as a world heritage cultural landscape. We may call it a bio-region, a functional unit of people and nature in which each part has its place and meaning. All its components are related to each other, and that is why it is beautiful.

Notes

¹ To be pronounced as in *Tropoja*. Albanian names and words are usually written in their original spelling in English language texts and transliteration based on English rules of pronunciation is not used. J in Albanian is largely equivalent to y in English.

² The Albanian spelling with –a, which is used by more than 90% of the territory's population, is used here instead of the Serbian spelling with –o.

