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MOURNING IN TRANSITION: GENDER, POLITICS, AND THE SHIFTING LAMENT TRADITIONS IN ALBANIA

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mourning in Transition: Gender, Politics, and the Shifting Lament Traditions in Albania

by

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This dissertation explores the significance, evolution, and current state of women's lament traditions in southern Albania, focusing on the city of Gjirokastër and its villages. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Albania between 2019 and 2024, through a blend of ethnographic research and personal reflection, this dissertation highlights the historical role of women as central figures in performing and preserving these practices.

In addition, this study examines how lament traditions have been shaped and challenged by different political changes, modernization, and migration. Interviewing survivors from various internment camps during the communist regime, this study investigates how those communities were forced to adapt and suppress feelings of sorrow. This dissertation further explores the decline of lamentation due to globalization, shifts in gender roles, migration, modernity, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates the importance of lament tradition in expressing and understanding feelings of separation and loss as well as the

ways this tradition can preserve, transform, and evolve during different and challenging times.

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complaint. I could not have done this without him, and I am endlessly thankful for his love and partnership in every sense of the word.

Pronunciation Guide for the Albanian Language

(Derived from Newmark et al. 1982:9-10)
A a (a) as in mama
B b (b) as in boy
C b (ts) as in cats
Ç ç (ch) as in chocolate
D d (d) as in dog
Dh dh (th)as in this
E e (e) as in bed
Ë ë (a, u) as in sofa, or must (a relaxed schwa sound)
F f (f) as in fun
G g a (g) s in go
Gj gj (gue/ y) as in George or figure
H h (h) as in house
I i (ee) as in see
J j (y) as in yes
K k (k) as in kite
L l (l) as in love
Ll ll (ll) as in hill
M m (m) as in mother
N n (n) as in name
Nj nj (ny) as in canyon
O o (o) as in more
P p (p) as in pet
Q q (cu/ky) as in cute/bikini
R r (r) as in race
Rr rr (rr) as in varoom (strongly trilled r)
S s as (s) in sit
Sh sh (sh) as in shot
T t (t) as in toot
Th th (th) as in think
U u (oo) as in food
V v (v) as in vine
X x (dz/ds) as in adze/heads
Xh xh (j/dg) as in jam
Y y as in german ü
Z z (z) as in zebra
Zh zh (strong zz) as (Fr). or like the “s” in vision.

Note on Translations and Sources

Throughout this dissertation, all translations from Albanian to English are my own. The transcription and representation of Albanian laments require careful consideration as interlocutors change between oral tradition and linguistic evolution. Many of those laments use poetic elements, which I have tried to convey meaningfully in English. I noted the names of the speakers I interviewed formally and other individuals with whom I interacted more informally. Some of my requests are to remain anonymous, and therefore, I have used pseudonyms and indicated in the text with an asterisk (*) the first time I mention them. In other cases, speakers preferred to use only their initials during interviews.

Chapter One
Introduction

On a fall afternoon in September 2011, relatives and friends came together in Gjirokastër, a small town in southern Albania's hills, to say goodbye to my uncle. He rested in a coffin, wearing a suit, white shirt, tie, and shiny shoes. Though he was forty-eight years old, he looked like a groom ready for his wedding.

As custom dictated, men and women sat in different rooms. Women huddled around my uncle's body in the dark living room. Crying and made-up songs of grief filled the air. Each new person first went to my uncle's mom, wife, and children to show support, then shook hands with the other women before sitting down. Two women handed out black coffee with no sugar, matching the sad mood—the younger the person who died, the darker and more bitter the coffee.

From the next room, one could hear men talking about different things. Some guys shared nice stories about my uncle talking about his life and who he was, while others argued about what's going on in the world getting into talks about government and money matters. The men, dressed in dark suits, were either seated in small groups or standing in clusters, gesturing animatedly as they spoke.

While I waited in the women's room, my 70-year-old aunt, the deceased's mother, began to lament some half spoken, half singing lyrics. As I started paying attention to her lyrics, I understood how deeply sad and upset she was about her bad luck. She looked at my uncle's wife and gestured for her to join in, but she went to the kitchen, saying she was overwhelmed with sadness. My aunt with disappointment in her voice whispered, "The today's young people." On the other hand, my uncle's wife, in the kitchen while sobbing said, "I just want everyone to leave. It is my loss. Why do they judge me for not knowing these old tunes?"

On this day, I witnessed differences between the ways older and younger generations grieve. The elders demonstrated knowledge of the rituals and stuck to them while crying, mimicking yesteryear songs. The younger generation seemed disconnected and handled their emotions in a private way. Despite these differences, all of them seemed content with staying united as a community while remembering the deceased.

As a child in the early 1990s, elders made sure to keep me away from rituals and practices related to funerals. I was not allowed to attend funerals and kept away from family members who were intimately participating in the funerary rituals. All of this changed when I attended my great-grandmother's funeral, which was my first personal experience of the powerful tradition of laments performed by women at the age of 15. I

experienced a communal act of story-telling while celebrating the life of the deceased, which was led by crying and lamenting women. However, it was my uncle's funeral in 2011 that deeply affected me and sowed the seeds of lifelong fascinations about laments.

After moving to the USA in 2013, I found myself longing to observe and participate in my cultural traditions. Through several conversations inside and outside graduate school classrooms, I realized how little is known about the art of lamentation from Albania. This served as a driving force behind pursuing this dissertation to study, record, and present the tradition and preserve the voices of my ancestors.

Aim of the Dissertation

In Albanian society, women are the flag-bearers of the tradition of laments, and they play a key role in its preservation. This dissertation aims to study the significance and development of lamentation practices in southern Albania with a special focus on the region of Gjirokastër. It presents the influence of politics, economy, and societal changes on the tradition, which continues to foster a sense of identity among the people. This dissertation also investigates the connection between globalization and people's shifting attitude towards the practice of grief and mourning in current times.

This dissertation starts by studying the role of women in preserving

this tradition in Albanian society. It also delves deeper into the suppression of lament practices during Enver Hoxha's communist regime and demonstrates the resilience of this practice despite political pressures. Bridging the gap between memory and history is as it transforms fragmented experiences of trauma into one coherent narrative that can be integrated into broader historical accounts. By turning raw grief into collective stories, lamentation fosters both healing and the inclusion of silenced experiences in the historical record.

Further, the study highlights the challenges lament traditions face in the modern context impacted by urbanization and mass migration. Lastly, it studies *kaba*, the instrumental laments performed by men of the society, which took laments from private mourning to public celebrations. Through ethnographic fieldwork and music analysis, this dissertation studies the resilience and evolution of the lament tradition and comments on its place in modern Albania.

Albania: A Synopsis of its History and Geography

History

Albania, known as *Shqipëria* (Land of the Eagles), is situated in southeastern Europe, bordered by Montenegro and Kosovo to the north, North Macedonia to the east, Greece to the south, and the Ionian and Adriatic Seas to the west.

Albanians are descendants of the ancient Illyrians who settled in the western portion of the Balkan peninsula around 1000 B.C. (Marmullaku 1975: 5). As the Byzantine Empire began to lose its grip on its Balkan territories, Ottoman forces expanded their conquests into Asia Minor and, by 1354, had crossed the Dardanelles to enter the Balkan Peninsula (Vickers, 1999: 4). After fierce battles, Albania was brought into submission with the city of Durres to the last one to be taken in 1501 (ibid: 14). In the 17th century the Turks began a policy of Islamization to ensure peace in the Albanian lands, and for people who adopted Islam they had their taxes lowered and they were given land (Vickers, 1999: 6). Although the population resisted, by the 18th century, a large population of Albania converted to Islam.

Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, amidst the turbulent backdrop of the Balkan Wars. However, the path to a stable nation-state met challenges, including foreign occupation during the World Wars and redrawing borders dictated by international treaties (Fischer 2022). After World War II, Enver Hoxha established a communist regime with strict policies that rapidly shaped its economy and society while isolating the country for decades.

During the early years of communist rule, Albania acted as a Yugoslav satellite, receiving aid through treaties of friendship (O'Donnell 1999; 58). Relations between Hoxha and Tito worsened by 1948, resulting in the

execution of pro-Yugoslav party members. Afterward, Albania shifted to a stronger and closer relationship with the Soviet Union. Quickly after Stalin's death in 1953, tensions with the Soviet Union escalated, especially after Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes (Abrahams 2016; 19). China came to Albania's aid when Hoxha sought assistance and security without compromising the nation's sovereignty, introducing large-scale aid and reforms inspired by Mao's Cultural Revolution (Abrahams 2016; 20). However, after American President Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, Hoxha shifted towards a path of self-reliance. He declared Albania the only true socialist state in the world (Abrahams 2016; 22). The fall of communism in Albania in the early 1990s paved the way for political reforms, and incremental integration at international levels, including membership in NATO and aspirations to join the European Union.

Geography

Shkumbini River divides the country into two main regions: the northern *Ghegëri*, inhabited by the Gheg Albanians, and the southern *Toskëri*, home to the Tosk Albanians (see Figure 1). Northern Albania, characterized by its rugged mountainous terrain, has historically posed significant challenges for its residents, leaving some areas cut off from the outside world (Elsie 2015: 3). In contrast, the southern half of Albania, though not wealthy, has consistently

been more developed than the north, both economically, socially, and culturally (ibid. 3-4).

Figure 1: Shkumbini River divides Albania into northern region of Ghegëri and southern region of Toskëri

One could notice the influence of geographic regions on culture and social diversity which affects language, customs, social structures, and music. In other words, geography has shaped northern and southern Albania's unique identities and traditions. This dissertation focuses on the city of Gjirokastër, a city in southern Albania known for its rich musical traditions and cultural heritage.

Figure 2: Pazari i Vjetër, Old Bazaar, Gjirokastër. Photo taken by the author.

The city of Gjirokastër is one of the largest cities in southern Albania, with a population of 23,270 people based on the recent census of 2023. Gjirokastër is a UNESCO World Heritage site due to its well-preserved Ottoman-era architecture and its cultural significance in southern Albania.[1]The city is renowned for its distinctive stone houses with slate roofs and wooden balconies, reflecting Ottoman architectural styles from the 17th and 18th centuries (see Figure 2). Dominating the city is Gjirokastër Castle, one of the largest in the Balkans, which has served as a fortress and cultural venue (see

[1] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d). Historic Center of Berat and Gjirokastër. Retrieved from UNESCO World Heritage Centre Augus 1, 2024.

Figure 3). The city is also the birthplace of Enver Hoxha, Albania's former communist leader. It is a hub of cultural traditions, particularly in music and folklore, hosting vibrant festivals like the National Folklore Festival that takes place every four years in the city of Gjirokastër.

Figure 3: Gjirokastër castle. Photo taken by the author.

Fieldwork in my Hometown

My relationship with the city of Gjirokastër and its people has been integral to my life. Born in Gjirokastër, I spent my formative years immersed in its rich cultural tapestry before my family relocated to Ioannina, Greece, when I

was nine. Despite the move, I maintained a strong connection to Gjirokastër as I traveled there for every celebration, festival, and holiday.

Growing up in a musical family, with my parents deeply involved in the local music culture as musicians, I immersed myself in music and dance from an early age, fostering a deep appreciation for southern Albania's traditional music. By age 10, I started performing all around Albania as a violinist and singer at music festivals and concerts. These experiences supplemented my connection to the music of my culture, forming the foundation for my academic pursuit in ethnomusicology.

After moving to the USA in 2013, I visited my hometown yearly during summer break. However, it was not until 2019, when I received a fellowship from the music department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, that I started my fieldwork and allowed me to research Gjirokastër and its villages (see Figure 4). I explored the area's rich musical heritage and its role in shaping the cultural landscape of southern Albania, which deepened my understanding of those traditions that have been a significant part of my life.

I initially believed that conducting research in a familiar environment would be somehow easy, especially compared to the challenges faced by foreign scholars. Linguistically, my fluency in Albanian and Greek seemed to provide an advantage. I assumed that my existing relationships with the

people in my hometown would offer insights that are hard for foreign researchers to access. However, familiarity sometimes led to assumptions that needed to be questioned. I had to balance between my dual roles as a community member, and a female scholar which required careful navigation.

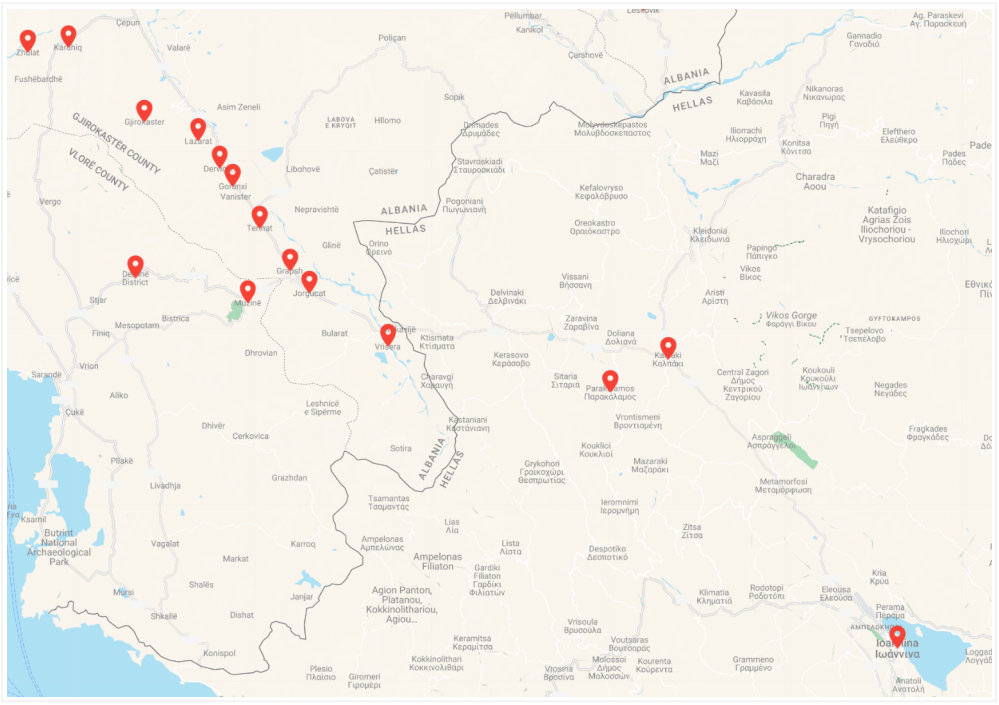

Figure 4: Locations in southern Albania and Epirus, Greece, visited as part of fieldwork.

My female interviewees were welcoming and engaged with me; however, I found it challenging to interview men. Men in positions of "authority" were reluctant to talk in detail and frequently changed the subject according to their agenda. In numerous instances, they asked me to abandon

my research questions and pursue their interests, insisting that they "knew better." They believed that my exploration of traditional music, especially on laments, added no value. To navigate these circumstances, I had to ask my parents to accompany me to those interviews, which helped the conversation stay on topic.

It was difficult for me to ask my parents to accompany me on all these trips because they work full time, and mostly because I also felt embarrassed at the thought of being accompanied as if I were still a child. Anthropologist Lila Abu–Lughod describes how she also felt a bit embarrassed that her father accompanied her on her trip to Egypt (1988; 141). However, unlike my situation, Abu-Lughod's father knew his culture and societal norms that discouraged an unmarried woman from traveling alone. In my case, the necessity for having "adults" with me was not about cultural expectations but rather about ensuring that my voice was heard. My parents' presence allowed me to express my opinions freely, ask the necessary questions, and keep the interviewees focused on answering what I was asking rather than steering the conversation toward what they felt needed to be discussed.

Most of my interlocutors were happy to talk with me, but they often felt awkward when I asked for formal consent forms or permission to record them. Many signed the forms because they trusted our relationship. However, when discussing sensitive topics, such as the years during the

socialist regime (Chapter Four), many people were uncomfortable having their names made public. They allowed me to use their voices only if I agreed to use pseudonyms or keep them anonymous. For this reason, I have changed some of the names in this dissertation to protect the identities of my interlocutors and respect their privacy. It seemed that even 30 years later the lingering effects of living under a communist regime had instilled a deep-seated fear in many people.

During my research in southern Albania, both Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities emphasized that lamentation transcends religious boundaries. While rituals might differ, Andro Koçollari stated, "When someone passes, we don't discriminate; we are there for both Muslims and Christian families"(personal communication, Gjirokastër 2023). This shared approach highlights lamentation as a unifying cultural practice rooted in communal grief, not religious division. As a result, in this dissertation I did not distinguish between religions, and I focused instead on the commonalities in their traditions.

During my fieldwork, I constantly aimed to strike a balance between offering an insider's perspective while maintaining an outsider's objectivity. I sought to create a space that allowed me to study the subject while drawing on my instinctive understanding as someone familiar with the culture, ensuring that my insights remained personal and academically rigorous

(Racy 2003; 7). This dissertation has been directly shaped by the questions and the responses I received from the people of the community, along with my own analysis from both the perspective of an ethnographer and a local. The stories and the style with which women remembered and narrated everyday life impressed me. Stories have a teller and an audience and give us details about the social and emotional dynamics of the Albanian community. Similar to anthropologist Abu-Lughod, through the stories the people shared with me, I have used those stories to construct a critical ethnography (Abu-Lughod 1993; 16). I gathered those stories and included them in this dissertation to highlight the voices of the women and to underscore the importance of addressing the issues I explore in this dissertation.

As a local who grew up with those people and their rituals, I found it impossible to be part of funerals and discuss topics so important and emotional without including myself in the narrative, therefore autoethnography is a very important element in this dissertation. Since the 1990s, autoethnography and reflexivity have become popular practice in ethnomusicology (see Barz and Cooley 1997). Autoethnography refers to "ethnographic research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. In autoethnography, the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied" (Ellis 2008; 49). I found myself often shifting back and forth

between a broad ethnographic perspective and turning inward exposing a vulnerable side that is shaped by cultural interpretation (Ellis, 2008; 48). I also follow in the footsteps of my advisor. Like ethnomusicologist Tanya Merchant I see how "through autoethnographic method, it is possible to analyze and discuss oneself as a research subject, as well as the person engaged in the act of research (Merchant 2020; 129). In this dissertation, I include myself in the narratives and in the events, I participate in maintaining a reflexive approach to highlight my methods, roles, and biases. This allows me to provide a transparent and nuanced understanding of the research and its influence on the findings and encourages me to remain true to the stories and emotions of my interlocutors.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I employ a methodology that combines ethnography, digital ethnography, archival work, participant observation, and autoethnography. I draw insights from data collected through extensive interviews, audio and video recordings, manuscript analysis, and observing participants at funeral rites. Instead of conducting research that forces predefined theoretical frameworks, I root the analysis in the ethnography to remain true to the stories and feelings of my interlocutors.

My methodology engages participant-observation, including recording and analyses of live funerals. During 2020 and 2021, I was unable to travel back due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I used applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Messenger to conduct interviews with my main interlocutors. As many of my interlocutors were elderly and not yet vaccinated, I found online interviews to be the safest option for them. The main disadvantage of this approach was that several participants were unfamiliar with the digital tools leading to many interruptions.

At that point, this was the best way forward to continue this dissertation work. My stay in Albania was from April 2022 to October 2022, and I spent most of the time in Gjirokastër to follow up with lamenters I had met during my previous visits. I was apprised of the sad news that during my absence one of my interlocutors, Andro Koçollari, had passed away. This was a strong reminder of the limited time I had to complete my work.

For my fieldwork, I frequently traveled to different places with Gjirokastër as my base, where I would return. During one of my planned visits to Tirana, I met Simon Mirakaj, a former political prisoner who had spent forty years of his formative life in a concentration camp. Mr. Mirakaj talked at length about his experience in the camp and remembered deeply unsettling details. In addition, he connected me with other political prisoners whom I interviewed as well. During another of my visits to Tirana, I attended

a community event, Concert for Political Prisoners, where I interacted with current politicians and discussed the current tradition of laments.

I also traveled to Epirus, Greece, to meet musicians who perform instrumental laments. I met Vasilis Kostas and Thanasis Vollas, the popular *laouto* (lute) players to discuss the tradition of lamentation in Epirus. These discussions shed light on how the tradition of *kaba* (instrumental lament) in Albania evolved and changed, and how it compares to the genre of *moirologia* (laments) performed in the region of Epirus (Chapter Six).

During the summer of 2023, I spent my time studying the archival materials in the libraries of Gjirokastër (Biblioteka 'Apostol Meksi') and Tirana (The National Library of Albania). I sought out archival sources at the *Arkivi Shtetëror Qendror* (National State Archive) and focused on the archival materials from the period during which Albania was under the communist regime. The goal was to uncover the ebb and flows the tradition of lament went through under the political climate of that period. These archival materials included letters and documentation pertaining to the deployment of new laws and regulations, concentration camps, and any public information available on political prisoners and their life.

I also used the summer to meet with my interlocutors. These people have shared a big part of their lives with me and welcomed me to peek deeper into their experiences, making me part of their family. During this

period, I had the opportunity to attend a few funerals and memorials. Researching this topic was challenging, not only because interlocutors are in a difficult mental state when they lose a family member but also because funerals are unplanned events. It was difficult to ask for permission to record someone on the spot who had just lost a loved one. Often, the family's grief made me hesitant to request permission to document the proceedings. On some occasions, the funeral was held at a remote location, which made it harder for me to travel. However, I made sure to attend the memorial services held 40 days, six months, and one year later after a person's passing. This was another avenue to meet people and learn more about the funerary traditions.

Existing Literature Review

The investigation of laments is of great significance not only in Albania but within many cultures across the world. It is a significant genre of expression of grief and alleviating pain. My dissertation examines the current body of scholarship on laments derived from three primary languages: Albanian, Greek, and the English language scholarship from the disciplines of ethnomusicology, anthropology, musicology, and even psychology.

Albanian and Greek studies focus on historical, morphological, and musical aspects, examining how the traditions are preserved through time

(Lolis 2003; Shetuni 2013; Sokoli 1965; Tole 2023). English literature studies, on the other hand, focus on a different perspective, examining the social and cultural contexts of laments (Alexiou 1974; Sugarman 1997; Moufarrej 2005, 2024.) They highlight the roles that women play in laments and the gendered nature of musical performances. While there have been many of studies on laments throughout ethnomusicology or anthropology around the world (see Alexiou Seremetakis 1991; McLaren 2008; Köchümkulova 2015, Moufarrej 2005 et al) the scholarship on Albanian laments and their role in societies during political change remains understudied.

Literature Review on History of Albania

The 1990s opening of Albania's borders created a new chapter in the nation's history, allowing scholars from various fields to study its diverse music traditions, values, and practices. Prior to that opening, Albania's political isolation left traditions and culture unexplored by scholars from outside. Such access began the process of grasping how historical and political developments have shaped and reshaped a sense of Albanian identity. Understanding Albania's historical context is essential for this dissertation: Ottoman rule for 500 years followed by independence in 1912, two World Wars, a strict communist regime, and thirty years of democracy.

Historians Bernd J. Fischer and Oliver Jens Schmitt provide a comprehensive narrative from the Illyrians to the Ottoman domination. They investigate the challenges of becoming an independent country and all the factors that contributed to the formation of the modern nation-state. Additionally, they investigate the ascension of communism under the leadership of Enver Hoxha and its far-reaching consequences for Albanian society (Fischer & Schmitt 2022).

Historian George Gawrych provides an analysis of the Ottoman Empire's influence on Albania during the period from 1850 to 1912. Gawrych's research underscores the distinct regional traditions within Albania, mainly focusing on the regions of Ghegeri and Toskeri. He studies the fragmentation of Albania under the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in significant disparities in the dialect, customs, and music of the different regions of Albania.

In Ramadan Marmullaku's work, we see the socio-political dynamics of Albania in the mid-20th century, which is essential to understand how Albania developed over time. He looks at the Albanian language, traditions and how historical events have shaped the national consciousness (Marmullaku 1975). In addition, he examines the organization of Albanian society, the role of women in north and south Albania, and how traditional practices have persisted through different political changes.

Miranda Vickers presents an overview of the complex history of Albania from the Ottoman period through the post-communist era. Vickers carefully highlights the struggle for independence and the formation of national consciousness (Vickers 1999). In *The Albanian National Awakening*, Skendi delves into building Albanian national identity between 1878 and 1912 (Skendi 1956; 1967). Anthropologist Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers examines how the Albanian elite used myths to preserve their culture and heritage. All these works, although written from a historical standpoint, provide insights that help form this dissertation.

For the period of communist Albania, it is important to understand the political and cultural policies of Hoxha's regime. Prifti's analysis of these policies and how they affected everyday life in Albania show how the regime used traditional practices like laments to fit its ideological framework (Prifti 1978). Journalist Blendi Fevziu has written a biography of Enver Hoxha, which details his political strategies and the totalitarian nature of his regime (Fevziu 2016).

Together, these works contribute towards the dissertation by providing a range of perspectives on Albania's history, culture and politics. They give context for how internal and external perceptions have shaped Albanian identity and how the laments are a means of expressing and negotiating these identities. They add to the dissertation's exploration of the

role of music and cultural expressions in shaping and reflecting Albanian identity during times of significant change.

Albanian-Greek Language Literature

Albanian literature already consists of research on traditions, music, dance, and classification across various regions of Albania (Sokoli 1963; Shetuni 2013). Shetuni's work carefully and systematically categorizes music by different regions and provides a detailed manuscript of different music genres and styles present in Albania. His work is significant as he defines and describes polyphonic and monophonic music, traditional music, instrumental laments, and folklore.

Vasil Tole has conducted a comprehensive examination of southern Albanian music tradition that include *saze (*instrumental laments) ensembles and Albanian monody (Tole 2007; 2023). Tole explores the rich tradition of saze music, its history, instrumental composition, and cultural context (Tole, 1998). Tole analyzes the monodic style of much of Albanian traditional music, classifying and describing its forms and functions in Albanian society. In addition, Tole explores the expressiveness and emotional power of Albanian laments and covers laments from across Albania(Tole, 2011).

Important research (Tozaj 1996; Rama 2012) investigates Albania's shift from dictatorship to democracy, focusing on the political, social, and

economic changes during this time. Tozaj studies how communist rule affected Albanian society and the hurdles in moving to a democratic system. Rama digs into the stories and wrong ideas about the Albanian transition, showing the layers and myths that have colored public views. These studies give key background to grasp Albania's cultural and political scene, which has shaped traditional practices, including music and laments, after the system fell in 1991. By looking at the back-and-forth between dictatorship and democracy, this research helps us see how past and political forces have molded today's Albanian identity.

Research into Greece's historical and cultural dynamics is significantly enriched by studies focusing on its musical traditions and rituals. For this dissertation, the emphasis is on folk music (gr. *δημοτική μουσική)*, which encompasses a wide array of regional styles within Greece. As noted by Mark Slobin, the definition of folk music is complex and cannot be confined to a single interpretation, as its meaning has varied widely across different contexts and periods (2011; 1). This exploration of Greek folk music offers insights into how these diverse musical traditions contribute to the country's cultural identity and continuity and how similar or different it is from the music I am studying in southern Albania.

Scholarship on Greek musical traditions offer valuable insights into their cultural significance. *Μοιρολόϊ και Σκάρος* (Laments and Skaros) by

musicologist Kostas Lolis examines the lament and shepherd's song in Epirus, highlighting their roles in conveying grief and community identity within regional traditions. Similarly, To *Λαϊκό Κλαρίνο στην Ελλάδα* (The Clarinet in Greece) provides a comprehensive analysis of the folk clarinet, emphasizing its evolution and the diverse stylistic elements that characterize its performance (Mazaraki 1984). This study underscores the clarinet's importance in representing regional identities and social narratives in Greek folk music. These works are particularly significant because, in southern Albania, the clarinet and violin are the primary instruments used to perform instrumental laments, illustrating the cross-cultural influence and shared musical heritage between Greece and Albania. Together, these studies enhance our understanding of how traditional music functions as a vehicle for cultural expression and continuity, reflecting both historical influences and contemporary practices.

English Literature on Laments

My dissertation focuses on Albanian women's lament practices, their transmission, and adaptation over time. My particular focus on Albanian women lamentation also sets my scholarship apart, as there has yet to be an English-language monograph on the subject. Margaret Alexiou's pioneering work on ritual lament in Greek tradition is an important study that integrates

laments from ancient Greek poetic texts, Byzantine laments, and oral traditions from rural Greece, presenting the continuity in the form and function of lament (Alexiou 1974). This approach has informed my research into how similar continuities can be observed in Albanian laments, particularly in their adaptation and transmission across different historical and cultural contexts.

Gail Holst-Warhaft's work also incorporates laments gathered from fieldwork in modern rural Greece. Holst-Warhaft extends Alexiou's comparative, diachronic study by emphasizing lament as an empowering art form for women. She highlights how laments provide women with personal expression and solidarity while acknowledging that this expression is often viewed as dangerous within patriarchal cultures (Holst-Warhaft 1992).

Research by anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, explores how, in a male-dominated society, women have the "last word" to comment on the lives of individuals is very important (Seremetakis 1991). Through laments, women create enduring images of the deceased, making them heroes in the memories of families and communities. This concept is significant to my dissertation, where I examine how the creation of "heroes" through laments varies across different times in southern Albania (Chapter Four and Five).

On a more ethnographic level, Seremetakis describes her challenges in conducting fieldwork and interviews. Despite her Greek origin, she struggled

to approach the women in the villages with whom she conducted interviews. During my fieldwork in Albania, I faced similar issues that needed to navigate. While my background gave me certain advantages, I also encountered many challenges at first with building rapport with the senior male interlocutors.

Anthropologist Anna Caraveli-Chaves's work on Greek laments further illuminates the connection between lamentation practices and women's societal roles (Caraveli 1980, 1986). She demonstrates how lamentation is deeply embedded in the social and cultural domains traditionally associated with women and that laments serve as a means of personal expression and a form of social resistance, allowing women to connect with their community, their emotions, or shared experiences. This perspective is important for understanding how lamentation functions as both an expression and a tool for resistance, particularly in the patriarchal society of southern Albania.

Drawing on the work of ethnomusicologists like Elmira Köchümkulova, who explores the role of funerary and wedding laments in Kyrgyz society, and Maureen Pritchard, who sheds light on the practice of koshok (laments), this research delves into how myths, metaphors, and regional customs are woven into lament narratives (Köchümkulova 2015; Pritchard 2009). Like the lament practices in Kyrgyzstan, Albanian lamenters

frequently incorporate symbols, myths, and metaphors in their songs, reflecting the deep cultural significance of these elements.

The work on funerary laments in Finland and wedding laments in China has been very useful in this dissertation. Elizabeth Tolbert and Anne McLaren highlight how lamentation is intricately tied to the emotional experience of separation through death or marriage and how these rituals maintain the connection between the deceased or departed and the family (Tolbert 1990, 2007; McLaren 2008).

Ethnomusicologist Guilnard Moufarrej analyzes how lament performance in funeral rituals among Lebanese Maronites represents how music and poetry contribute to communal grief (Moufarrej 2005). This aspect echoes the findings in this dissertation, as it demonstrates that lament practices are not only expressions of individual grief but also collective grief. By integrating ethnomusicological perspectives, this research provides an understanding of the role that laments play in shaping and expressing feelings and grief, as well as exploring the roles of the two genders.

In collaboration with linguistic anthropologists Edward and Bambi Schieffelin during their work among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, Steven Feld developed a compelling emotion theory that positions music as a pivotal mediator between the living and the departed (Feld 1990). He interprets weeping as a mechanism for "cleansing toxic substances,"

suggesting that crying serves as a cathartic process to release accumulated negative emotions (Feld 1990; 257). The concept of "wept song" is particularly relevant to my study, as it underscores the role of lamentation in articulating emotions of pain and sorrow. In the context of southern Albania, women predominantly assume this role, using lamentation as a cathartic medium to navigate feelings of separation and loss. Although men traditionally refrain from public expressions of grief, they engage in performing pain through specific forms of lamentation, a topic explored in Chapter Six. Feld's insights thus provide a valuable framework for understanding how musical expressions of grief function as both personal and communal acts of emotional purification.

Ethnomusicological Research

Ethnomusicologists have studied the role of music in societies across cultures. Starting with music in Albania, Nicholas Tochka's study on Albanian popular music during socialism, including the pre-communist period from 1912 to 1945, critically examines how the state exerted control over music and artists (Tochka 2016). Under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the government aimed to "uplift" the so-called "backward population"by manipulating musical traditions (ibid, 11). This process highlights the state's role in reshaping cultural expression to serve political objectives, reflecting

broader efforts to construct a homogeneous national identity through tightly controlled cultural production.

In *Performing Nostalgia: Migration and Creativity in South Albania*, ethnomusicologist Eckehard Pistrick examines migration songs and music in post-socialist Albania, highlighting how these songs are emotionally embodied and often expressed through lamentation (Pistrick 2015). In my dissertation, the analysis of migration is very important because the phenomenon of migration has become a significant social issue (Chapters 5 and 6). As migration led to widespread separation and loss, laments increasingly addressed these themes, with women using these expressions to cope with the pain and emotional impact of their loved ones leaving the country.

In the edited volume *Balkan Popular Music and the Ottoman Ecumene*, Donna Buchanan's exploration of music's adaptation to new cultural realities is further enriched by her analysis of the intricate interplay of music, politics, and identity in Bulgarian society over the past century (Buchanan 2007a, 2007b). Similarly, the evolution of Albanian folk-pop music in the post-communist era is critically examined by Jane C. Sugarman, who investigates how shifts in political and social landscapes have influenced the transformation of this genre and its role in shaping Albanian identity (Sugarman 2007).

Additionally, Tanya Merchant's research on Uzbek nationalism emphasizes the significant role of women in shaping national discourses, illustrating how institutionalized traditions are influenced by Western arts (Merchant 2015). Through her analysis, Merchant demonstrates the interconnection between music traditions and national identity, offering valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of musical practices within the post-socialist context. Collectively, these studies provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the transformation of arranged folk music and the broader cultural shifts in Albania and beyond during the transition from communism to post-communism.

My Contribution

This dissertation combines methodologies from the fields of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and gender studies. Although several studies examine Albanian music (Sugarman 1997; Tochka 2016; Pistrick 2015) and the tradition of laments across the world (Alexiou 1973; Moufarrej 2005; Tole 2015; Köchümkulova 2015), lament in south Albania has been until today understudied.

This study aims to bridge the gap by analyzing the tradition of lamentation and the important role of women. In addition, it explores the

reasons why this tradition has been preserved through time, has transformed during political changes, and has declined in post-socialist Albania. It emphasizes how essential the practice of laments was during all political changes to reinforce social bonds within their community and to provide avenues to release their emotions. This dissertation examines the various ways these practices have been used as a tool for women to express their feelings of grief and sorrow.

In addition, this study explores the interchanges between memory and resilience by investigating the dual role of this tradition as a means of collective identity and as an adaptive mechanism in response to political oppression. Addressing sensitive topics such as political oppression and highlighting trauma and grief serve as a platform for exploring the intersection of memory and trauma. Lastly, this dissertation articulates different ways grassroots traditions react to societal changes and understand the reasons why some practices, such as laments, face decline in today's world.

Theoretical Framework

This study addresses several critical ethnomusicological concerns as it explores the intricate relationships between music and gender and the interplay between collective memory and tradition. These interconnected

themes are central to understanding how music functions as a form of artistic expression and a powerful medium through which cultural identities, emotional experiences, and gender roles are articulated and transmitted across generations.

Music, Gender and Identity

Given my focus on how women have preserved the tradition of laments over the centuries, this dissertation explores the relationship between gender roles and musical practices in southern Albania. Important to my theoretical framework is literature on gender and identity within the discipline of ethnomusicology and beyond. Jane Sugarman (1989, 1997) has explored in depth the relationship between the musical sound and the social structure of the Prespa Albanian community that played a key role in contextualizing lamentations in Gjirokastër. Sugarman argues that through song, women can "mold their individual selves into the form of a cultural ideal" (Sugarman 1989; 193). In this cultural context, it is usually the women's duty to mourn the dead, and the other women around the deceased mourn together and express their grief in a way that unifies them. Although the role of women as caretakers within the household is essential, it often lacks social recognition and power. However, through the act of lamentation, women suddenly acquire a significant, temporary form of authority. It raises questions about

how lamentation as a practice confers power upon women across generations within a patriarchal framework.

To better understand the importance of grief in women's lives, it is necessary to examine gender dynamics and how gender-related behaviors are differentiated in these cultural settings. The book *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, edited by Tulia Magrini, examines the relationship between music and gender in the Mediterranean region, providing valuable insights into the strong and powerful role women hold as custodians of laments within a patriarchal society (Magrini 2005). Additionally, Ellen Koskoff's work (1991, 2014) is fundamental in supplementing the analysis of the role of women in lament traditions.

The performance of lamentation is more than a ritual; it is a practice that distinctly separates the roles and experiences of the two genders. Patricia Shehan Campbell's research demonstrates how women in the Balkans maintain and transmit their identities through their roles as "song-carriers" (Shehan 1989). Lamenters, whether professional or amateur, create an atmosphere of mourning by creating songs and melodies that express profound sorrow and deep pain. But their performances are not limited to vocal expressions. These expressions are complemented by physical gestures such as shaking, head movements, and emotive hand expressions, making grief "performative" (Butler 1999).

This analysis is enriched by incorporating feminist theorist Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but is constructed through repeated actions and the stylization of the body, which she describes as "the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 1999; xv). In Albania, girls are taught the skill of lamenting from a young age via observation of their mothers and grandmothers. This early experience ingrains the gendered aspects of mourning into their bodies and minds, perpetuating gender roles.

In conclusion, I believe that the examination of musical performance is key to gaining a deeper understanding of southern Albanian society (Seeger (1987) 2004; Feld (1982) 1990). Ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger argues that music does more than merely mirror social structures; it plays an important role in shaping and interpreting social and conceptual relationships and processes (Seeger 2004; xiv). This theory reflects the idea that music is important in constructing societal dynamics.

Similarly, Steven Feld argues that "expressive modalities are culturally constituted by performance codes that both actively communicate deeply felt emotions and as seen with the Kaluli people, reaffirm foundational mythic principles" (Feld 1990; 14). These insights align with my focus on how

musical performances, specifically laments, are not only expressions of grief but also vital components in the construction and development of culture and tradition in Southern Albania.

Memory and Tradition

During my interviews, I noticed that the words "memory" and "tradition" were frequently used by my interlocutors. To understand the relationship between those words, I first distinguish between individual and collective memory, and then separate tradition from nostalgia. Maurice Halbwachs posits that individual consciousness is shaped by social structures and institutions, suggesting that individual memory encompasses both shared community memories and personal recollections that are performed, felt, or remembered (Halbwachs 1980; 36–37). Complementing this view, Shelemay contends that "collective memories of the past and realities of the present are further welded together in the transmission process itself," emphasizing how tradition is both preserved and adapted as it is passed down through generations (Shelemay 1998; 26). This view highlights how traditions change over time, influenced by the memories that communities choose to hold onto, blending the past with the present.

Collective memory plays an important role in the construction of identity, particularly within communities, such as ethnic and national groups.

This is especially true in the case of Albanian national identity, where nationalism has been instrumental in forging a unified sense of self among the population. Political scientist Benedict Anderson posits that nations are "imagined communities" because, although most members will never meet each other, they perceive themselves as part of a single, cohesive group. The sense of unity is forged through shared elements (language, history, and traditions) that evoke a common past (Anderson 1980). In addition, music scholar Georgina Born builds on Anderson's description, using the term "musically imagined communities" (Born 1993). During my fieldwork, I realized that even in a male-dominated society, through laments, women "perpetuate them indirectly by sustaining domestic rituals and by listening" (Shelemay 2009; 286). Through their music, their bodies, faces, voices, and performative grief, women play an integral role in the ways the community remembers and presents history and identity. Working within these theoretical frameworks, I seek to understand how collective memory supports the continuity and coherence of national identity, binding individuals together through a shared cultural narrative.

For this dissertation, it is crucial to understand how individuals have gathered and categorized their memories, especially when doing so under a repressive regime. As ethnomusicologist Ioannis Tsekouras says, "historical discourse is always political" (Tsekouras 2011; 24). The concept of the "usable

past" arises from the merging of historical narratives with collective memory (Todorova et al., 2004). This process often creates tension between personal memories, how the community discusses and agrees to present those memories, and how they later become recognized and officially accepted as a source of truth (Tsekouras 2016).

In relation to trauma theory, Cathy Caruth's work highlights the need to bridge the gap between memory and history. She argues that by exploring memories found in different creative expressions, we can reclaim and understand parts of history that are not available today (Caruth 1996). Expanding Caruth's concept of creative expressions to include such artistic and emotional expressions as lamentations during Albania's communist regime, we can better understand the voices that were silenced by the regime. Since lamentation is an expression that is passed down orally from one generation to another, Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory offers a meaningful way to understand how trauma can pass from generation to generation. In addition, it explains that traumas are inherited even by those who did not experience those traumas firsthand, through the oral sharing of memories and stories (Hirsch 2012).

The memories of those who suffered repression often contrast starkly with the official histories celebrated by the regime. The laments sung or silenced in the camps tell a vastly different story than those where women

were compelled to glorify the deceased as a "socialist hero." By applying Caruth's and Hirsch's frameworks, I can better assess how these divergent memories are expressed, suppressed, or transformed through music and performance, revealing the underlying tensions between personal recollections and state-imposed narratives.

Throughout this dissertation, I use gender, identity, tradition, and memory frequently. I do not view lamentation merely as an expression of grief, but I focus on what this expressive form of music accomplishes. What does the lament performance mean to the women who perform it and attend a funeral (Chapter Three). How, during the repressive political regime, lamentation evolved from a form of free expression to being silenced, and how the remembrance of lyrics helps uncover parts of history that are not widely accessible (Chapter Four). I seek to tell the history of Albanian women from their perspective. Their experiences, their traumas, and overcoming those traumas lead to the expression of their identity (Chapter Five). Tradition and memory are also important to understand why people in Albania consider modernity and migration to be the main factors contributing to the decline of this tradition (Chapter Six).

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is organized chronologically into six chapters, each building on the historical and cultural development of lamentation practices in Albania. The structure allows for a comprehensive exploration of how these practices have developed and transformed over time, reflecting the broader social, political, and cultural changes in the region.

Chapter Two introduces the rich tradition of lamentation in Albania, highlighting its significance as a powerful means of expressing grief and preserving cultural memories. The chapter provides a historical overview of lament traditions in Albania, discussing their origins, key concepts, and the performers involved. It also explores the regional diversity in lamentation practices, particularly the distinct differences between the northern and southern parts of the country.

Chapter Three delves into the critical role that women play in preserving and performing lamentation in Albania. Through personal reflections and ethnographic observations, the chapter explores how lamentation serves as a unique form of expression for women. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first examines the role of women within the patriarchal structures of Albanian society; the second focuses on how women have maintained the oral tradition of laments, emphasizing the emotional and psychological functions of these practices; and the third section explores the

historical context of heroic laments, which celebrate the lives of notable figures and preserve their memory.

Chapter Four explores the profound effects of Albania's communist regime on lamentation practices, particularly focusing on the experiences of those who were politically persecuted and interned in labor camps. Through the lens of survivor Simon Mirakaj and other prisoners, the chapter examines how the regime's oppressive policies led to the suppression of traditional lamentation practices within the camps, where fear and self-censorship silenced expressions of grief. It also discusses the challenges faced by survivors in the post-communist era as they grapple with the lingering trauma and the efforts of artists and musicians to aid in the healing process.

Chapter Five examines the decline of traditional lamentation practices in Albania, focusing on the impact of modernization, migration, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition from a socialist regime to a modern democracy, coupled with the forces of globalization, has led to a decreased value placed on traditional customs like lamentation. The chapter explores how migration, particularly the movement from rural to urban areas and abroad, has disrupted the intergenerational transmission of lamentation knowledge, leaving older generations isolated and struggling to keep the tradition alive. The chapter also discusses the effects of the COVID-19

pandemic, which has further altered lamentation practices by necessitating more privatized and digital forms of grief expression.

Chapter Six expands beyond funerary laments and introduces other forms of lamentation present in the daily life of Albanian communities. It introduces kaba (instrumental laments), which are an important part of southern Albanian traditional music and are performed by men and their ensembles. In addition, this chapter examines the concept of wedding laments performed when the bride leaves her parents' house. Although these laments occur and are performed on different occasions—often on happy occasions—I analyze how these performances have a close association with funerary laments, revealing shared emotional resonances across these performances.

Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, summarizes my research and underlines my conclusions based on my fieldwork. Lamentation works as a bond between women of society, as a catalyst for expressing and processing pain, and as a means of making heroes and forging identities. In addition, in this chapter, I raise possible directions for future research and broader points of comparison and connection.

Chapter Two
Expressions of Grief: Exploring Albanian Lament Traditions

Albania is a small country with a rich cultural and geographical diversity. One of the oldest traditions that has survived across the country for centuries is that of funerary laments known as *vajtim* (mourning). Women of the family use their voices to release their emotions and express grief and sorrow for the deceased. They create a powerful homage that helps in remembrance and the honor provided to the deceased life. From the most isolated villages of the mountainous north to the old towns of the coastal south, Albania brings a unique and diverse experience for the visitors. Geographically, different regions mean that the country brings a unique performance to different traditions and customs. Northern laments are characterized by monophonic melodies while southern laments are polyphonic and melodic, reflecting a more free, flowy line.

This chapter establishes the historical context for the genre of laments, including definitions, key concepts, and performers. The next section examines how the musical traditions of northern and southern Albania differ significantly and investigates the reasons behind these regional variations.

While discussing geographic influence and variations, first, I present the characteristics of the men's "*gjama*" observed in the northern regions, focusing specifically on the area of Malësia, where my interlocutors have

lived and experienced this tradition. Next, I shift the discussion to the unique lament practices of southern Albania, particularly in the region of Labëria, which includes the city of Gjirokastër and the villages around it. Here, lamentation is traditionally performed exclusively by women. By examining these practices, the chapter highlights the diverse cultural expressions of mourning in Albania and underscores the importance of gender and regional identity in shaping these lamentation traditions.

Mourning Through History

The ritual of lamentation and burial singing is an ancient tradition observed in many countries worldwide. From ancient Greece and Egypt to Finland, India, Brazil, Lebanon, and Kaluli, laments have long offered societies a way to cope with the emotions of loss and pain (see Köchümkulova 2015; Tolbert 1990; Wilce 2009; Feld 1990; Alexiou 1974; Auerbach 1987). The funerary rituals, combined with laments, express grief and pain where sorrow can be "cried' and 'wept' through lament (Maher 2019; 135). Hearing and performing laments allow the community members to "their souls to feel lighter" (Goluboff 2008;84). In this way, lamentation enables members to process feelings of separation and loss and allows them to return to a "normal" life.

Providing a single definition for laments can be difficult because of the multifaceted nature and different cultural contexts. Researchers have described lament as "a discursive and musical genre associated with crying and funerary observances" (Wilce 2008; 25) or "stylized expression of grief" (Dwyer 2008; 138). Other studies offer different perspectives: Kaeppler (1993; 497) refers to laments as "wept thoughts" and ethnomusicologist Tolbert as "crying with words." These definitions emphasize the connection between lament and crying, whether through actual tears or sound. The complexity and diversity in these interpretations highlight why it is difficult to encapsulate the concept of lament within a single definition.

Since the early 16th century, scholars and travelers who visited Albania have documented the country's cultural landscape, presenting insights into the practices and traditions of its people across various times and regions. One notable account comes from Thomas Smart Hughes (1786–1847), an English theologian and historian who traveled to Greece and Albania around 1812. In his memoir *Travels in Sicily, Greece, and Albania,* Hughes recounts his observations of women in the city of Gjirokastër, Albania, and Ioannina, Greece, who engaged in lamentations three times a day for their husbands who had died in the war years ago. Hughes compares these lamentations to the grief expressed by Penelope for Odysseus in the

Homeric epics: “In the same way, as these Albanian women, faithful Penelope had wept for Ulysses” (Hughes 1820; 28).

Maximilian Lambertz is a well-known figure in the study of the Albanian language and oral tradition. He highlights the structural and thematic similarities between Albanian women’s laments and the Homeric laments, saying that “in the epics of Homer, similar forms of lamentation are found, which still exist in Albania today” (as cited in Çaushi 2021; 25) The main characteristic of those laments is the solo-chorus form, a form we will see it is even today practice in some laments of southern Albania. These parallel bridges both ancient and contemporary practices in the region of Albania.

Studies in Albania are often associating the tradition of laments to Homeric Epics (Tole 1997). Musicologist Vasil Tole takes it a step further associating lamentation with the songs Sirens sing before they drag sailors into their death (Tole 1997; 2014).[2] Although the Iliad narrative focuses on the final weeks of the Trojan War, it highlights also the role of four women (Briseis, Helen, Andromache, and Hecuba) who perform laments and

[2] While I won't go into detail about these studies, it's important to acknowledge the significant debate among Albanian scholars on this topic. On one side, some support Tole's argument linking iso-polyphony to laments and Sirens, while on the other, various musicologists and ethnographers disagree, considering these claims to be flawed, misleading, and often baseless. Based on my research, I agree that studying Homeric Epics and other ancient Greek tragedies is essential for understanding the age and significance of this tradition for women. However, I find the hypothesis linking Sirens and lamenters insufficiently supported and lacking in documentation to confirm such an association.

demonstrate the connection between lamentation and Homeric epics (Dué 2002: 10). Homeric mourning is marked by extravagant displays of grief, such as loud wailing, tearing of hair, and self-inflicted facial scratches (Holst-Warhaft 1992;114) similar with the women's performance of grief in southern Albania. This epic depicts also the blending of antiphony solos followed by choral responses (Jarrett 1977; 40).[3] These elements are very important especially as we dive into the presentation of southern Albanian women laments and resonates with the ways women blend in a similar style solos and choral responses. The resemblance between laments performed in southern Albania and Homer's description is quite striking, making Homer's depiction the first source to provide a general idea of how old and important this genre was for the society.

When Black is not Just a Color

An important component that women lamenters experience during lamentation is the feeling of pain. When I interviewed Lele, a professional lamenter from southern Albania, she expressed, "Strong pain means stronger lament, stronger feelings, and stronger healing" (personal communication,

[3] The Iliad records several poignant laments, including those of Hector's wife, Andromache, and his mother, Hecuba, upon learning of his death, as well as Briseis' lament over the body of Patroclus and Helen's lament.

2023). The level of emotional intensity felt during grief can significantly impact the way people express their sorrow and, ultimately, how they heal from it. The grief experienced by a mother who loses a young son is different from the grief of a mother losing her elderly father because the nature of each loss carries unique emotional weight and meaning. Expressing grief through the medium of laments serves both as an emotional release and a facility to process healing. In a way, it is a therapeutic aspect that "bridges the world between the living and the dead" (Holst-Warhaft 1992; 29-30).

Laments serve as a bridge and mediator between essential realms of existence: life and death, the physical and the metaphysical, the present and the past, and "temporal and mythic time" (Caraveli 1980; 144). Once the lamenters start their laments, they adopt the role of a medium. Through them and their lyrics, the people left behind in the realm of the living can, in a way, communicate with the deceased. This process allows participants to engage with the realm of mortality and, through this engagement, achieve a form of "catharsis" (Caraveli 1980; 143). By navigating these spaces (living-dead), laments are used to honor the deceased and provide a way for the living to process their grief and find solace in shared expressions of mourning.

My grandmother often divided her life into two distinct periods: the years she spent with her husband and the forty years she spent mourning him. She once confided in me, saying, "His last day was my last day." Since

that day, her entire existence has been merely a matter of breathing. She refused to remove her black mourning clothes even during celebratory family events and refrained from dancing or singing. This constant state shaped her identity from the moment her husband passed away, and she was not the only one to go to this extreme grief. Women of her generation even today they follow the same steps.

In Albanian culture, black serves as a potent symbol of grief and loss, representing the profound inner mental state of women experiencing deep sorrow over the death of a loved one (du Boulay 2009; 282). The notion of mourning is called *zi, zija* and it signifies the representative color of bereavement, the inner affective state, and the act of crying (Kondi 2012; 183). Within folk traditions, black is also linked to the earth and soil, further emphasizing its connection to the concepts of mortality and mourning (Maher citing du Boulay, 2019: 150). During a funeral I attended, I heard a grieving mother repeatedly utter the phrases *mu nxi jeta (*my life is blackened) and *më nxive jetën* (you blackened my life). This expression suggests that her life has been irrevocably altered or ruined by this loss.

The association of grief with the black color in Albanian culture is evident if we see how these women dress in their daily life. Grieving women would always wear black stockings, dresses, and headscarves. These garments serve as a visible and enduring symbol of the "blackened" life,

marked by profound sorrow and social withdrawal that women endure following the loss of a loved one. According to Kondi, while a black dress represents an external indication of mourning, a lament reflects the "blackness of the mental state" (Kondi 2012; 183). The association of black color with grief is so rooted in women's mentality, that they often dress in black from the moment of the tragedy until their own death, signifying a lifelong engagement with loss and remembrance.

Mourning in Albania displays distinct regional characteristics. Although, predominantly, laments are associated with women, in the northern part of the country, we can see a ritual where men perform grief in a distinct and unique way. To illustrate how these funerary traditions differ between regions, I will present two distinct practices from the north and south of Albania. By examining these examples, I aim to highlight the unique cultural elements that shape mourning rituals in each region. This analysis reveals how regional identities are shaped and expressed through the rituals of lamentation.

Gjama of Northern Albania

An important expression of grief and response to death in northern Albania is the *Gjama e burrave* (gjama of the men). Known as *gjama* in Gheg dialect or *gjëmë* in Tosk dialect, the term in Albanian has its roots in the Latin word

gemitus (or *gemert*), which carries a range of meanings including moaning, whimpering, death throes, roaring, noise, sorrow, poison, grief, and sadness (Dushi 2015; 45).[4] Ethnomusicologist Ramadan Sokoli defines gjama as "a form of grief during death where they scream, scratch their faces, and beat their chests" Sokoli 1965; 154). Gjama serves as a powerful ritual through which men honor the deceased. The practice of gjama is observed primarily among the Roman Catholic Mountain communities in northern Albania, including regions such as Malesia e Vogel, Dukagjini, Tropoja, Puka, and Malësia e Madhe (Great Mountains). It is also prevalent among the Albanian minority in Montenegro. (Kondi 2012; 199).

The initial signal of a gjama is a loud scream that emanates from a distance, typically originating within the village, and follows explicit rules regarding its conduct and the individuals allowed to participate. Participation is restricted, and the group size can vary between 10 and 40 men for a small or medium gathering. However, for a "burned-out death"—referring to the untimely death of young, unmarried, with no children males or people of high social standing, the group can expand to include 80 to 120, or even up to 160 participants (Zojzi 1953; 236-237).

[4] The term gjama comprises a rich spectrum of meanings such as catastrophe, bad news, thunderbolt, woe, and shouting (Kondi 2015). Linguist E. Çabej gives meaning such as disaster, calamity, death news, mandate, thunder, roar, lamentation, while Von Thallosczy includes meaning such as to wail or break into crying, when implying of deep pain of the body or unbearable grief (Dushi 2015: 45).

The men arrange themselves in one to four lines, either in a straight formation or a semi-circle (see Figure 5). The older men lead the gjama, which unfolds in four distinct stages. Initially, the mourners begin the gjama at 500 to 1,000 meters (0.3 to 0.6 miles) from the deceased's body, maintaining this distance during the first stage (Tole 2011; 20-21). They remove their heavy garments, known as zhunga, and loudly scream the syllables "*hou*" or "*ho*,"including the deceased's name (see Figure 6).

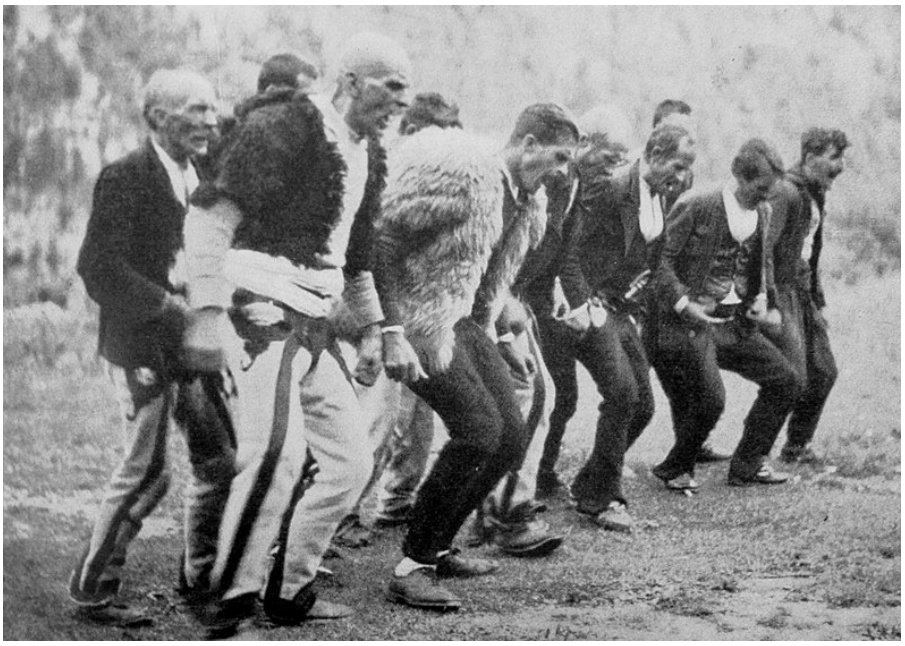

Figure 5: Practicing Gjama. Picture taken by anthropologist Reiner Schulz in 1937 at a funeral. Photo is in the public domain at commons.wikimedia.org.

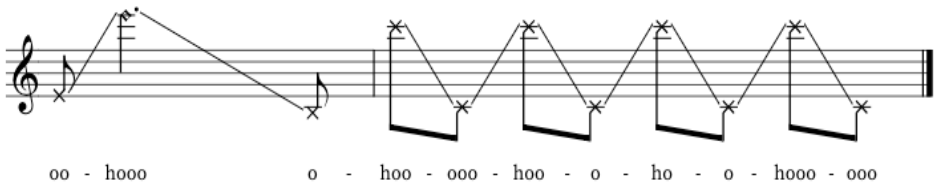

Figure 6: Male shouting. Transcription by the author. Gjama performed in Shkodër, Albania 2023. Used by permission.

Next, the mourners move closer to the body, they beat their chest until they wait for the next cue. They remove their hands from their waste, and they scratch their faces, dropping their blood in the deceased direction (Tole 2011; 20). The last phase starts in silence, staying close to the deceased, putting their forehead in the ground, and hugging the earth. They stay in this position until a family member comes and say "*ua shperblefshim ne te mira*" (may we repay you with good things) (Tole 2011;20).

The gjama can last anywhere from six minutes to an hour (Tole 2011; 20-21). Although women sometimes accompany men during the gjama, they typically remain two to three steps behind. Young boys may also participate, but they stand behind the main *gjamatëtarë*. Men are not expected to lament their deceased wives; instead, this duty falls to the woman's maternal tribe, typically her brothers or cousins. This practice arises from the belief that a woman can never fully belong to her husband's family. Her sibling bond is more robust and persists through distance and time (Whitaker 1981; 147-148). The cultural norm that men in Albania do not lament their wives reveals a

striking manifestation of patriarchy that limits emotional expression and reinforces rigid gender roles.

The communist regime prohibited the performance of gjama. Based on my interlocutors, some believed that gjama was considered outdated and contradicted the party's ideology, which sought to modernize Albanian society. Others attributed the ban to Hoxha and his administration, asserting that they harbored a bias against the Geghs as they had been wealthier, and the regime confiscated their wealth. A.Xh said:

> "We (Geghs) fought harder in the war against the fascists. Almost every family in my village was involved in business, importing and exporting outside of Albania. These families were quite wealthy, which made them the first to attract the regime's attention" (personal communication, 2023).

After the fall of communism, people started to revive gjama, drawing from the memories of the older generation who had witnessed this ritual in the past and slowly started performing it in their villages. I was not able to record and attend gjama in person despite my multiple visits to those regions. In September 2024, I was to receive a video from the JOQ the largest platform for social news and entertainment in Albania showing a performance of gjama.

In this video, gjama took place inside a large hall rather than the deceased's house. A group of 11 men performed for 7 minutes. This

performance works as a reminder of how gjama used to be but in my view, these rare and limited performances seem to be more staged performances rather than authentic expressions of grief and lament. First, since the funeral is held in a large hall rather than the deceased's home it is a shift away from the original context. Moving the ritual to a public space alters the atmosphere and makes it more public and less intimate. Additionally, the cues of the performers are visible to everyone around the group, which indicates a level a rehearsed performance. The chest-beating appears theatrical, as it is performed as part of the stage rather than as a genuine pain (see Figure 7).

Figure 7:Last phase of gjama. Performed in the city of Shkodër, August 30, 2024. Recorded by JOQ. Permission obtained by the author.

Regardless of whether today's performance of gjama a genuine expression of grief or a reflection of the past is, I believe it is important that it

continues to be performed. Keeping the ritual alive helps preserve the cultural heritage and maintains the chain of tradition, allowing future generations to connect and keeping the memory of this practice alive.

While this study does not aim to analyze gjama or lament performance of men in Albania, I find it necessary to address them briefly to provide a fuller understanding of Albania's overall lamentation traditions. The next section analyzes the women's lament in the region of Gjirokastër focusing on the ways these laments are performed and the characteristics that makes them so unique.

E Qara me Botë (Crying with World) and E Qara me Ligje (Crying with Words) in Southern Albania

In Gjirokastër, the term used to describe events related to death and the subsequent situation within the family is *kësoll*.[5] Kësoll begins with wailing and lamentation, honoring the deceased through the funeral process and continues with the reception of mourners (see Table 1). The ritual of mourning and grief is a phenomenon common all-around Albania in one form or the other. However, the distinctive ways in which the women lament

[5] This borrowed word has become part of the city's local jargon, similar to terms like vaki and mort used in other parts of the country.

the deceased make the tradition of Gjirokastër and its surrounding villages unique.

Steps	Description
1. The Death Announcement	News of the death spreads through the community, triggering *kësollë* (the mourning period). Family, friends, and neighbors gather at the deceased's home.
2. Preparation of the Deceased	The body is cleansed, dressed in ceremonial clothing, and placed in a visible location. Men and women separate into different rooms.
3. Initiation of *E Qara me Botë*	A senior woman begins with spontaneous, loud wails, setting the tone of grief. Other women join in, creating a chorus of mourning.
4. Role of Lamenters	Women take the lead (most of the time women of the family), improvising personal and poetic lyrics and melodies. Others contribute by maintaining the *iso* (drone). Sometimes families invite professional lamenters to lament the deceased.
5. Transition to *E Qara me Ligje*	Lamentation becomes more structured and reflective, focusing on the deceased's life, fate, and moral or philosophical themes.
6. The Burial Process	The body is taken to the cemetery in a procession. At the gravesite the women of the family continue the loud wails and cry loud.
7. Post Burial Mourning	Mourners return to the home. Lamentation and mourning continue, followed by memorial rituals at set intervals (e.g., 40 days, six months, one year). Some women lament for months, years, and even decades

Table 1: Step-by-Step Events in Funerary Rituals of southern Albania.

In this region, it is not only the women within the immediate family who perform laments, but often, women with no familial ties to the deceased also

participate. My interlocutor, Saimir Skënduli recalls, “I still have in my ears the atmosphere from these voices. Voices in different ranges coming together as one, in the same painful mental state” (communication, Gjirokastër, 2022). His reflection captures the emotional impact of the lamentation rituals, where the collective expression of grief resonates deeply, transcending individual loss and embodying the communal experience of mourning.

It is important to consider the etymology of the phrase e *qara me botë* (crying with world). We cannot use a single definition for this term, as interpretations can depend on researchers' studies and their experiences with the city of Gjirokastër and its people. According to Fitim Çaushi, e qara me botë “refers to crying with horror, characterized by delivering bad news with uncontrollable cries and loud screams” (personal communication, 2022). In his book *Pse qajnë Kuajt e Akilit (*Why did Achelles” horses weep), ethnomusicologist Vasil Tole defines the term botë by referencing the linguist Eqrem Çabej, who notes that botë refers to the clay pitchers that women use for carrying water. Tole connects this to mourning as being associated with a large number of tears, therefore, to the water held in pitchers. He further draws a parallel between the clay pitchers (made from clay or mud) and the funerary ceremony, symbolizing the deceased's return to the earth (Tole 2011; 36).

My method of defining e qara me botë is from first-hand reports of my interlocutors, who were born and raised in Gjirokastër and have lived their whole lives in the city. According to my interlocutors, this practice is a vital part of their heritage that is historically significant. In Gjirokastër, those outside the familial circle are sometimes called *botë* (world or stranger). Saying things like "what will the world say" or "*kush mba vesh botën, prish kokën* (whoever listens to the world loses their mind) exhibit awareness of how important outside views could be to the society. Thus, in the subconscious of this community, bota refers to an "outsider"—someone who willingly comes to pay respects.

E qara me botë is a form of grieving and lamentation in which many people come together to mourn the deceased collectively at the deceased's house. Along with the immediate family, people of the larger community—friends, neighbors, coworkers —join in expressing their grief under this tradition. The communal character of e qara me botë emphasizes the social side of bereavement in Gjirokastër, where loss is a shared emotional trip rather than a singular grieving experience.

Fitim Çaushi remembers a moving event from 1978 in the village of Erind. By mistake, a tractor driver drove over a worker asleep in the fields. Çaushi was instructed to choose a woman to break the terrible news to the family.

> "When we found the woman refused to sit inside the truck and instead climbed into the back, where she began crying out with loud screams. Her cries echoed through the village as we approached. The sound drew other women from their houses, all of them distressed and afraid of what had happened. They started following the truck, wondering which household would be receiving the tragic news. Once the truck arrived at the house of the deceased, the women began to cry out with loud screams, lamenting phrases such as 'What has happened to us?' and 'poor me.' Other women joined in, extending the syllables of 'oi' and 'iii' as they moved around the bereaved family members." (personal communication, 2022).

Fitim Çaushi's story offers a glimpse into the customary grieving traditions of the region. The story emphasizes the communal aspect of loss and the critical role women play in the grieving process. The woman choosing to climb into the back of the truck demonstrates her readiness to publicly express grief and deliver the tragic news to the family. Her shouts prompt other women to come out of their houses, indicating a collective response to loss that extends beyond the walls of a single home. In addition, this loss underscores the interconnectedness of a society where shared human loss is deeply felt. The women's tears and gathering around the departed highlight the essence of public grief, where communal outpouring allows people to externalize their loss, promoting an emotional release and healing process.

E qara me botë is an integral part of the grieving ritual initiated by women. This vocal expression serves as the initial mourning stage, setting the community's emotional tone. The women's howls during this time capture the intensity and rawness of group loss, reflecting an auditory manifestation

of collective grief (Kondi 2012; 161). According to Fitim, "Women would howl, and their howls would be transmitted from house to house and spread like wildfire from house to house" (personal communication, 2022). This picture shows how the grieving process transcends the immediate family and encompasses the entire society in a shared experience of loss.

During this stage of mourning, women do not create lyrics or melodies. Rather we hear them producing sounds and howls such as *korba une* (poor me) and *qyqja une* (alas, me). These half-spoken and half-screamed words symbolize the raw emotion of the moment and communicate the pain and suffering without even using language. Lele, an 80-year-old professional lamenter, described the initial stage of expressing grief during e qara me botë. "We women would first start me botë (with world), and all other women that had joined would *ulurijne* (howl) *uë uë uë*" (personal communication, 2022). When I asked her if she could demonstrate the sounds, she hesitated. She was concerned that retelling them in the same way as in mourning would bring bad luck to her house and her family. Despite this, she offered a whispered rendition in a low octave, providing examples of the mournful sounds that characterize the ritual (see Figure 8).[6] The howl as an ominous vocal signal is

[6] The belief that the sounds of mourning could invite misfortune underscores the deep connection between the ritual and the spiritual world, reflecting the community's reverence for these expressions of grief. I remember, how closely howling was associated with death and bad fortune in my childhood. Whenever we would yell while playing around the house, the older people would scold us, saying, do not wail, because you will bring bad luck.

emotionally insufferable by women and therefore it is pressed in silence (Kondi 2012; 166). During my fieldwork, I attended several funerals but was unable to capture any howling or wailing in this specific format.

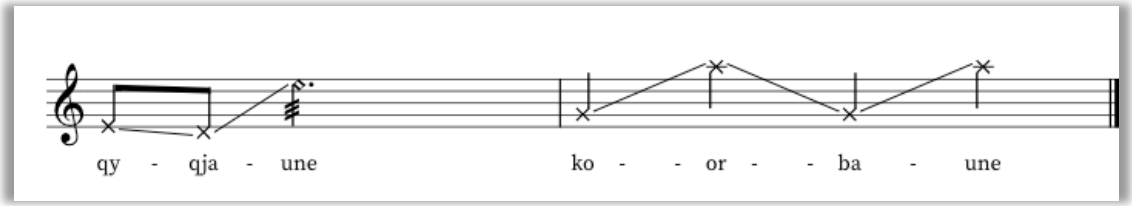

Figure 8: Female howling during e qara me botê. Transcription by the author.

E qara me ligje (weeping with words) dominates the commemoration of the deceased in southern Albania.[7] During this stage, the first loud screams of e qara me botë transform into more structured and melodic lamentations. The moment women enter the house, the howling stops as they reach the deceased marking a shift in the grieving process when the raw expressions become melodious and lyrical lines, laments. Similarly to botë, the word *ligje* has different meanings among Albania's scholars.[8] During my interviews, many of my professional musicians pointed in the direction of the Greek word *logos* (gr: λόγο) (speech, oration). However, other interlocutors such as

[7] Bledar Kondi is explaining that in Albanian, the word "ligje" primarily means "law," but it also has a secondary meaning that refers to "word," derived from the term "ligjerim," which encompasses the meanings of "legalization" and "discourse." (Kondi 2012: 191).

[8] Some scholars support the connection between *ligj* from the laying word lex, legem (law) and other from the Greek word logos, meaning word or reasoning (see Çaushi 2021:59).

Lele and Andro that did not know etymology of the words and they are self-taught lamenters described it differently:

> "We would mourn each person with words appropriate to their status. A teacher had specific words, different from those of a farmer. We followed what our mothers taught us and then added our own elements" (personal communication, 2023).

This reflection has led me wonder whether the Latin origin of the term "ligje," which is "lex" or "legem," would have any relevance for the specific use of those phrases passed down through generations. The structured use of language in lamenting might be considered as a form of cultural law, a set of unwritten rules controlling the expression of loss. If we consider the studies that associate the word ligje originates to the Greek word *logos* (λόγος) we can see a close relationship between laments used in southern Albania and the Greek *moirologia* (*moira* (μοῖρα, "fate" + *logos* ("speech"). This alternative perspective is supported by the striking similarities between the lament traditions of Epirus, Greece, and southern Albania, where both genres share features such as improvisation and melodic expression (see Chapter Six).

In addition, the quality of these laments, marked by spontaneous melodic lines and extemporal phrases is observed in other countries. An example is lamenting in Finland where the women's laments are described as "crying with words," a phrase that highlights the centrality of language and melody in conveying grief (Tolbert 1990; 81). This perspective stresses the universality of sorrow as a form of expression, where the creative use of

words and music serves to communicate strong feelings and create links between people of a community.

An important skill that this stage requires is improvisation skill, both musically and lyrically, as the women craft spontaneous verses that honor the deceased and articulate the collective sorrow of the community. The role of lamenters as improvisers highlights an overlooked dimension of spontaneous composition in music practices. Effective improvisation allows the lamenters to personalize the grieving experience. Professional lamenters have become extremely important in this stage of the grieving process in southern Albania. Their presence is essential for preserving the ceremony's emotional intensity and cultural authenticity as they guide the mourners in expressing the shared grief of the society and respecting the dead.

Such practices are frequently excluded from dominant narratives of improvisation that focus on male-dominated and institutionalized forms like jazz or contemporary music. Recognizing lamenters as improvisers broadens the understanding of what improvisational artistry is and, in addition, elevates the status of women. The lyrics are reactions to their deeds during his life; they are symbols of love in the eyes of the family left behind, they are symbols of grief and pain, and they are stories to keep their memory alive in the community. My interlocutor, Naxhi Kasoruho (age 70), remembers that a good lamenter must have a sorrowful voice and know exactly what to say for

everyone while standing next to them (personal communication, 2019). The capacity to create words and lyrics independently of their identity emphasizes their great awareness of those women who understand human emotion and their role as a bridge between the living and the deceased.

During this stage of lamentation, the women circle the body of the deceased, and they organize themselves into two groups: the soloist and the accompanying women. The accompany supports the soloist by sustaining a drone on the syllable iii or oiii. Mr. Çaushi spoke of observing funerals when the women split into two groups, each with a soloist. In these cases, the soloist of the first group would improvise a line, and then the soloist of the second group would carry on with the syllable oiii. Emphasizing the cooperative character of the lamenting process, this call-and-response system lets the two groups interact together (see Figure 9).

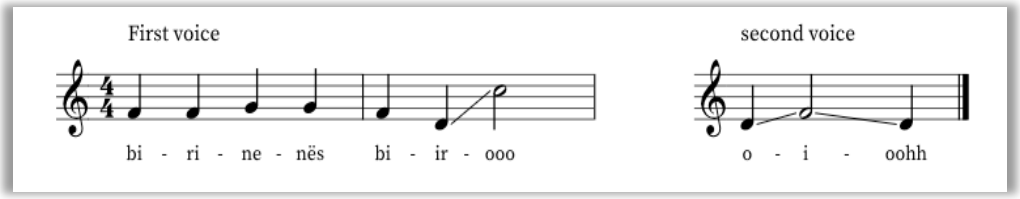

Figure 9: Example of laments performed by two voices. Transcription by the author.

The above example is an improvised lament featuring a soloist and a collective response that concludes each phrase with the syllable "o-i-oh." My interlocutor, Naxhi Kasoruho, provided this example when I inquired about

laments he could recall when his grandmother was alive. This example represents Kasoruho's remembrance of the lament form rather than a lament performed by a woman. This form of lamentation did not occur at the funerals I attended.

There are several reasons why this call-response performance did not occur. Firstly, for this dialogue to happen between the women, the women involved need to be confident and knowledgeable about the ways to respond to the first soloist. This requires a level of familiarity and skill with the traditional techniques, which many women did not possess. Additionally, professional lamenters often performed alone. This lack of participation suggests that this tradition is no longer practiced as it once was. A significant factor that ties all these reasons together is the reality that the tradition of lamentation is slowly fading. With fewer people knowledgeable about the practice and fewer opportunities to experience it in its original form, the tradition is struggling to survive (see Chapter Five).

In this section, I will not further analyze the music and lyrics, as the following chapters are dedicated to an in-depth examination of these elements. Through this study, I aim to present the forms of grief around Albania. I emphasize the significance of laments as a cultural and social

practice that continues to influence the experiences of the communities involved and affected.[9]

Conclusion

This chapter examined the different practices of lament and grief across Albania, emphasizing its cultural, historical, and social value. Lamentation reflects society's shared identity and values, transcending individual manifestations of grief. Through extemporaneous melodies and lyrics, lamenters create a framework for negotiating loss and turning pain into a narrative of remembrance. The chapter highlights the regional variations of laments. In southern Albania, women play a crucial role in mourning using two different stages in the funerary rituals: e qara me botë and e qara me ligje. These rituals serve as a cultural way of conveying collective grief and a way of honoring the deceased.

In contrast, in parts of northern Albania, gjama, a structured display of men's mourning, defines grief. This ritual stress the part sorrow plays in supporting social hierarchies and communal relationships and displays the unique cultural uniqueness of the mountain villages. The historical background of the gjama, including its decline during the communist

[9] Check Appendix to see the steps and of both two stages “E qara me Bote” and e Qara me Ligje in southern Albania.

government, demonstrates the dynamic character of cultural traditions and their adaptability to social and political changes.

The tradition of lamentation in Albania is a rich and multifaceted cultural practice that can shape identities and experiences of the community. Through exploration of regional variations, gender roles, and historical context, this chapter highlights the power of lamentation as a mechanism of expressing grief, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering communal solidarity.

Chapter Three
Women: The Bearers of Laments

As long as I can remember, my paternal grandmother, would always wear black dresses. Her face rarely smiled. In family events, whether small reunions or large festivities, she would always be there. Yet, she was a silent sentinel among the festive chaos. She was a silent sentinel among the festive chaos. She never joined our dance, and her voice never joined the songs we would sing. However, I could always see her eyes brightened with pride and satisfaction when she saw her family happy.

The times I remember her singing when she thought she was alone while sipping coffee on her balcony or tidying up around the house, her soft whispers carried lines and melodies. I did not understand the words she sang, but the unfamiliar melodies sounded like songs. I did not understand those lyrics were expressions of grief till I was older. They were not only words but expressions of sorrow. She communicated with her husband—who had been gone for many years—through these lyrics. This was her way of keeping him close, of keeping him inside her heart decades after his death.

To explore the tradition of laments and the role of women in preserving those practices, I divide this chapter into three sections. The first section examines the role and responsibilities of women while living in a strictly patriarchal society by providing historical and cultural background.

The second part investigates laments' preservation and women's ongoing adherence to this custom generation after generation. In this section, I will present case studies from the fieldwork in Gjirokastër to understand how laments contribute to community connection and emotional support. The third section will analyze the heroic laments, tracing their origin and historical context. I further analyze examples of laments that celebrate the lives and sacrifices of heroes. These laments have been drafted and used by lamenters to elevate individuals to the status of community heroes.

Through historical analysis, personal narratives, and cultural insights, this chapter attempts to show the ongoing relevance of women's contributions to the art of lamenting in Albania by means of historical study, personal experiences, and cultural observations.

Cultural Expectations

As a young child, I would accompany my grandmother to the cemetery on some Sundays. Together, we cleaned my grandfather's grave and placed fresh flowers. Some days, she remained completely silent, while on others, she spoke to him and lamented his absence. Her words sometimes reflected the sorrow of his early death and the many years she had spent without him, while at other times, she shared happy news as if keeping him informed about our lives.

> "For forty years, I have visited the graveyard every Sunday. There were a few times when crying in the cemetery, I heard people saying that my tears and songs won't bring back your husband. Sometimes it felt that I was doing something wrong, but then I could feel how happy he might have been around my song, and I never stopped" (interview with Marjanthi Spiri, Gjirokastër 2019).

This reflection sheds light on the gendered nature of laments. Lamenting is not merely a personal expression of grief; it is also a societal role that women are expected to fulfill. The remarks from others about the futility of tears reflect a broader societal tendency to undervalue women's emotional labor and rituals. Nevertheless, these practices serve as a source of inner strength for women who have lost loved ones.

In many patriarchal societies, emotional expression and family duties often define women's roles. According to the Kanun, the definition of marriage is "to form a household, adding another family to the household, to add to the workforce and increase the number of children" (Kanun 1989; 28).[10] Historically, a woman's role in a patriarchal society is to be a good housewife, a respectful daughter-in-law, and a good mother of the children (Auerbach 1989; 28–29). Women should be devoted and respect family rules as soon as they enter the new family (ibid: 21). This expectation of respect,

[10] The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini (Kanuni i Lekë Dukaginit) is the most famous compilation of Albanian customary law, applied across various historical periods (Kostovicova, 2005:116) Originally unwritten, it governed social behavior and daily life in northern Albania, Kosova, and among Albanians in Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia (Elsie, 2011:151).

devotion, and adherence to family rules highlights the importance of maintaining honor within the household.

Honor and shame connect with male dominance and are important elements that we can observe across Mediterranean culture. While men would rarely bring dishonor to their families, shame is directly linked with women (Magrini 2005; Herzfeld 1980, Racy).[11] In many cities around Albania, a well-known saying captures the profound concern with reputation: "*Më mirë të të dali syri sesa nami,*" which translates to "Better to lose an eye than to have a bad name (bad reputation)."This saying emphasizing that maintaining respect, integrity, and honor within a community is paramount. Anthropologist Wilce explains that shame creates a complicated interaction of social expectations, forcing people to carefully balance between resistance and submission (Wilce 2018; 121). The definition of shameful or honorable actions often varies depending on gender with men and women experiencing and responding to it in distinct ways (Magrini 2003; 11-13).

If a woman is single, her mistakes are seen as directly reflecting on her parents and brothers, and if married, her actions are considered to directly reflect on her husband and his family. Even when a family relationship breaks down, regardless of the cause or who is at fault, the woman is

[11] Although in this dissertation I will not get into further analysis of honor and shame in Albania or more on honor and shame see Magrini 2005, Herzfeld 1980, Brandes 1987, Sugarman 1989, 1997).

invariably blamed (Dubisch 1986; 9). Therefore, she must be strictly controlled by male guardianship and by her sense of modesty and shame (Cowan 1990; 51, Hirschon 1978). Even the architecture of houses in Gjirokastër provides evidence of women's status (see Figure 10). The doors and walls of the yards are built very tall, ensuring that women cannot be seen from outside when they gather to chat and drink coffee (interview with Naxhi Kasoruho, Tirana, 2019).[12]

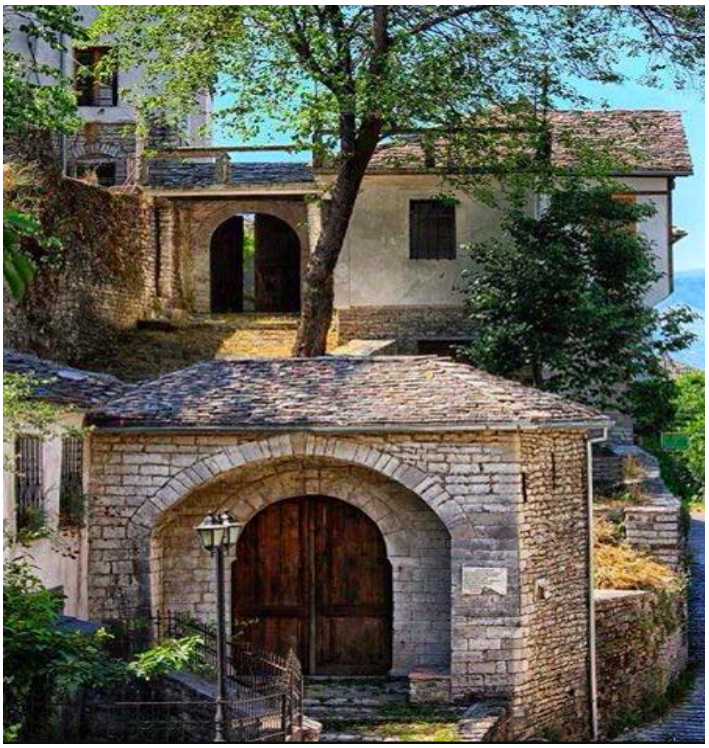

Figure 10: Old house of Gjirokastër showcasing the large doors. Picture taken by the author.

[12] Many houses around the old city of Gjirokastër combine Ottoman style and southern Albanian Tosk type residential housing of the early 19th century. The ottoman delineation of haremluk (private quarter for women) vs selamluk (public quarter) mirrors the houses. In Gjirokastër these spaces were symbolic, with the haremluk protecting family life and the selamluk projecting the family's social standing.

Men often view women as inherently possessing qualities that render them morally or socially impure, a concept described as "intrinsic taintedness" (Hoffman 1976; 338). In societies where shame and honor are closely linked to sexual modesty, honor is often associated with the word "skin." Women are categorized as *femër e ndershme* (honorable woman) or *e pa cipë* (skinless woman). An honorable woman is one who reveals her "skin" (honor) only to her husband. A skinless woman is perceived as one without honor, having lost her sense of shame (Peristiany 1966; 182). The concepts of honor and shame have influenced traditional celebrations and musical participation. Dancing and singing function not only as forms of entertainment but also as direct reflections of societal values and norms. Women's involvement in these activities, is often carefully regulated to align with their prescribed roles of modesty and honor.

Since men and women are assigned contrasting roles within family and community life, they are expected to play contrasting roles as in music performances (Sugarman 1997; 92). Notions of femininity and sexuality have profoundly influenced women's music and dance, shaping their performance styles in communities throughout southeastern Europe. Song performances are associated with special occasions and can further be categorized by age and gender. The different styles are named to make this classification explicit:

grarishte (women's style), *djemurishte* (young men's style), and *pleqrishte* (old men's style) (Sugarman, Leotsakos, and Prela 2001).

Respectable women in society typically sing and dance in ways that emphasize modesty and propriety by concealing their sexuality (Sugarman 2003; 88). While concealing their bodies, they are also expected to express emotion and exhibit greater superstition than men. Therefore, they lead communal expressions of emotions, such as happiness, pain, love, and suffering (Pistrick 2015; 64–65). They are expected to communicate their feelings through words, movements, and facial expressions. Expressing emotions through words, movements, and facial expressions is a socially approved way for women to exert influence and build relationships.

Genres such as lullabies and laments primarily belong to women's repertoire and are performed solo or by groups of women. Their songs focus on themes of family life and social rituals, reflecting their central role in nurturing family and community bonds (Sugarman et al., 2001). From an early age, women are taught to seek other women's support and openly share their emotions. Failing to express their feelings would bring shame to the family. As Andro Kocollari said "ishte turp mos dinte gruaja si te qaje" (it was shameful for the woman not to know how to cry) (personal communication, 2019).

Just as it was shameful for women not to lament, it was equally shameful for men to cry loudly over the dead body (Schieffelin 1976; 196). Weeping men could be labeled as weak, or *qaraman* (weeper). While men could tear up silently, crying was discouraged. My grandfather often told me, "*Burrat nuk dijnë të qajnë. Kjo është punë e grave*," (Men don't know what crying is. This is a woman's job). This perspective underscores a standard gender separation, with lamentation seen as an inherently female domain, reinforcing traditional views on gender roles and emotional expression (Alexiou 2002; Tolbert 1990; Seremetakis 1990; Sugarman 1997; Kondi 2012).

Laments, in the eyes of men, are perceived as a coded language they cannot decode, as they do not possess the technique. Understanding this language requires mastery of its technique, which men typically lack. Lamentation is more than just an emotional outburst; it is a structured, culturally significant form of communication meant to resonate with the entire community (Tolbert 1990; 82). Women have developed and refined the skills and intensity of lamentation, placing it beyond men's emotional and experiential grasp. This practice fosters a deep bond among women, reinforcing their social roles and survival strategies within the community (Alexiou 2002; 130).

"Women are stronger when they stick together," said Andro (personal communication, 2019). "From an early age, we are taught to seek support

from other women, to feel supported and share private matters that we cannot discuss with our partners."[13] Women practiced empathy by coming together to listen, share perspectives, and offer support and comfort to one another. This communal sharing of emotions often occurred during joint activities, with funerals representing the pinnacle of women's participation in the most painful moments of their friends' lives. At these gatherings, women allowed themselves to be vulnerable in front of their friends, seeking the trust and companionship necessary to share their pain. Having gone through similar experiences, they could connect on a deep emotional level, transforming individual sorrow into a collective experience. Instead of one woman bearing her pain alone, the entire community would participate, creating a powerful sense of solidarity.

The process of sharing pain and reminiscing about memories was essential to the creation of lamentations, with lyrics often composed spontaneously. This collective creation of laments enabled women to express their emotions together, fostering a supportive environment where they could process grief. By composing and performing these laments, women articulated their feelings, reinforced communal bonds, and provided a vital outlet for emotional expression that they preserved for centuries.

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[13]During my interviews, many women shared that they felt more comfortable discussing private matters with their female friends rather than with their husbands. This sentiment stems from being taught from an early age to view their husbands as the heads of the family, responsible for the family's well-being, and not to burden them with additional issues.

Laments: A Mother's Gift to Her Daughter

The act of singing laments is widespread across many countries, as illustrated in the works of Alexiou (2002), Caraveli-Chaves (1980) and Seremetakis (1991) in Greece; Tolbert (1990, 2007) in Karelia; McLaren (2008) in China; Moufarrej (2015) in Lebanon, Köchümkulova (2015) in Kyrgyzstan. In Gjirokastër, lamenting is an oral tradition wherein women pass on their art to the younger generation. In Gjirokastër, lamentation is an oral tradition passed down from mother to daughter, with older women typically teaching the art to the younger generation.

According to Köchümkulova, in Kyrgyz society, it is embarrassing and shameful for women to not lament for a deceased family member (Köchümkulova 2015; 198–19). This cultural expectation is similarly observed in southern Albania. Andro Koçollari recounted her experience:

> I did not know how to lament. When my father died, I couldn't lament. I was doing o-iii and keeping the iso, but no words would come to me. But some other women, when they were lamenting, no one could refrain from crying (personal communication, 2019) (see Figure 11).

Andro's narrative shows women's pressure to fit into the community. Her struggle to find the appropriate words and melodies during her father's funeral emphasizes the difficulty of performing this tradition. She mentioned that instead of lamenting, she would keep the drone. Daughters with good voices, musical and poetic skills, and strong memories stay close to their

mothers at funerals. The other daughters would stay close but only maintain the drone or engage in conversations to keep the mood light.[14] The drone, a single sustained note, helps the main lamenter maintain the melody's stability and create a sense of harmony. In polyphonic songs around southern albania the first voice, or the "starter," initiates the melody and passes it to the second voice, the "turner." This exchange creates a harmonious polyphony as the melody transitions smoothly. The "turner" then hands off the melody to a third voice, the "thrower," and possibly to a fourth or fifth voice, which joins with the iso, or drone, to establish a pitch-perfect harmonic foundation provided by the backing ensemble.

Holding the iso is often considered the most accessible way to participate in a celebration or ritual. By maintaining the drone, individuals can contribute without disrupting the melody or the soloist's role. This inclusivity allows even those who may not be highly musical to join the choir and be part of the communal experience. Women would often identify early on those daughters with stronger skills in lamentation, such as the ability to remember lyrics, improvise, or perform with emotional depth and the daughters with no such talent. The daughters that were not strong to be lamenters they would still participate and have a role in the emotional

[14] Andro explained that she was often asked to attend funerals not for her vocal skills but because she had a talent for keeping everyone awake and engaged during the night before the funeral.

atmosphere. This recognition and division of roles highlight the intergenerational transmission of tradition, where talent and aptitude shape each person's contribution to the ritual.

Figure 11: Andro Koçollari and Marjanthi Spiri after our interview. Picture taken by the author.

Practicality is another reason mothers teach their daughters to sing laments. Mourning at such an artistic level, when women are in severe pain, requires tremendous strength. Clearly, lamenters get tired and need a break. During breaks, they leave their place to their daughters. Stress or a lack of food, water, or sleep could sometimes cause the grieving person to faint.

Whatever the reason, the lamentation needs to continue. No one would dare stop the women from singing, and no physical limitation would allow mourning to proceed without laments. By involving their daughters in the lamentation process, mothers ensure that the younger generation learns the intricate skills and emotional depth required for this traditional practice. This hands-on training is essential for preserving the quality and authenticity of lamentation, as daughters learn by observing and participating under the guidance of experienced lamenters.

As Steven Feld states, "having a good cry" is a cathartic process to eliminate negative and destructive emotions (1990; 257). Crying acts as an emotional release valve, helping to process and alleviate feelings of grief, anger, and sadness. Laments in Gjirokastër are a uniting tradition among women, not only a means of musical expression of loss. Crying serves as a tool that helps with releasing feelings of grief and anger. “When a mother loses her child, she focuses entirely on expressing her pain. Our primary goal is to be there for her and support her,” my interlocutor *Angjelina explained to me. The community's role is to fully support her, creating a care and solidarity network.

In addition, lamentation works as a performative catharsis. The act of expressing grief and the words the lamenters use is important for the healing of the family members. Philologist J. L. Austin “indicates that the issuing of

an utterance is the performing of an action"(Austin 1975; 6). He highlights the power of words not just to convey meaning, but to shape reality. In the context of lamentation, the improvised lyrics they narrate the grief and offer a release of emotional pain.

Judith Butler, in addition extends the term to describe not only utterances but also sound, gestures, and clothes, therefore "performative" applies to any sign that accomplishes an action through its signification (Butler 1988: 527-528). In the context of lamentation, it is not just the words that are important but the entire range of expression but the sounds, the moves of the hands, beating their chests, wearing black color dresses. Through these non-verbal signs, lamenters emphasize how the entire body participate in this performative act and help with emotional catharsis.

The lament below (Figure 12)is from a funeral I observed in Gjirokastër where the mother is singing for her deceased son.

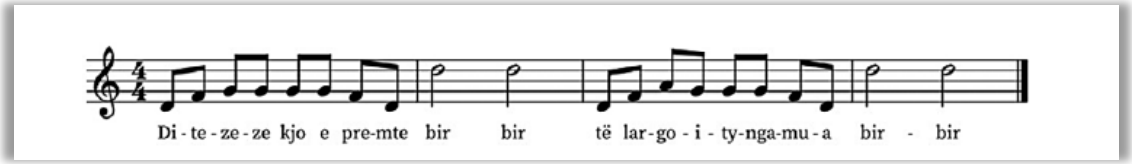

Figure 12: Transcription of lament, recorded by the author, Gjirokastër 2018.

Lyrics

Dit' e zezë kjo e premte bir,	Black day this Friday, son,
Të largoi ty nga mua, bir,	Took you away from me, son,
Zemrën nënës sec ja hape, bir,	Your mother's heart you broke, son,
Edhe nënën fillikate, bir	And you left your mother all alone, son.
Shokët shum' të respektonin, bir,	Your friends were respecting you, son,
Po ti ike dhe na le këtu, bir.	But you went away and left us here, son

Laments are easily identified by their distinct sound; the voice, in combination with lyrics, plays a crucial role in the identification of the genre. In the case just cited, the lyrics symbolize the close relationship between the lamenter and the deceased. Repetitive notes in the melody symbolize the singer's unceasing pain. The word *bir* (son) is sung one octave higher throughout the song and is clearly so painful for the singer that she only whispers or mumbles that word. The high pitch is mixed with a moan, and she often runs out of breath.

Lamentation as a genre involves improvisation. While the melody remains almost identical across different verses, elements such as rhythm, note duration, and few pitches change from verse to verse, adding a more improvisatory feeling (see Figure 13).

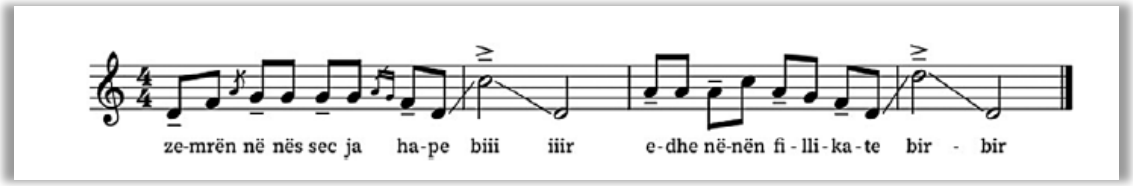

Figure 13: Improvisatory version of lament.

Laments feature descending melodies, ascending intervals of a minor seventh, portamenti on stressed syllables, and glissandi from high to low. The melody comprises four measures that evolve into various variations as the lament progresses, similar to the structure of standard laments, which often feature eight-syllable phrases in trochaic meter. The use of the pentatonic mode is characteristic of both southern Albanian and Greek Epirot folk music, and is predominant in laments, with few exceptions. During my fieldwork, I encountered only laments in minor pentatonic scales (Aeolian mode), although the genre can include a variety of scales and modes (Tole 2010; 49–50).

My interlocutors often mentioned that lamenters use the same melody with different lyrics to express their sorrow and pain, a typical extemporaneously genre of music. The songs they sing can transform into laments based on their personal experiences, the occasion, and their emotional state (Auerbach 1989). As shown in Figure 14 the melody remains similar, but the lyrics can shift from expressing sorrow to describing aspects of daily life. These improvised laments are not limited to themes of death but

can be sung at any private moment of grief. Women can lament loneliness, health, or "bad luck," and since laments are a product of their mental state, they can freely address their pain and frustration. The transcription below illustrates how a lamenter can keep the same melody but change the lyrics on the spot to reflect her emotions.

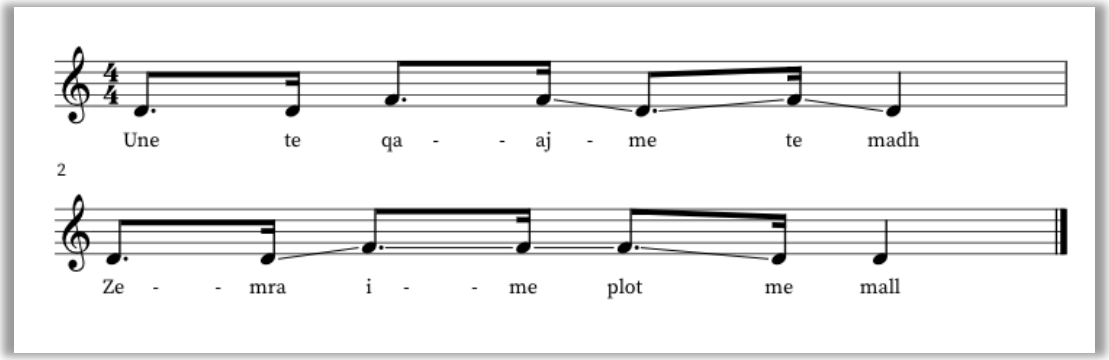

Figure 14: An example of two different laments following the same melodic line, transcribed by the author.

Version 1:	Unë të qaj me të madh	I cry for you loud
	Zemra ime plot me mall	My heart is missing you
Version 2:	Motra sot u martu	Your sister got married today
	Oh e mjera unë per ty	Ah, woe I'm for you

During lamentations, women can freely express their emotions without fear, as these moments truly belong to them. Over time, the laments change based on the feelings of the bereaved woman. The laments my grandmother created for her husband changed as she separated her life into

two parts. In the early years, her lyrics initially expressed grief and rage over her husband's departure. As her anger subsided, her laments transformed. They began to describe her daily life without him, sharing good news while maintaining the structure and essence of a lament. The following is a lament she recalls singing on the day of her son's wedding.

Lyrics

Birin tënd sot e martove	Your son today is getting married
As e rrite as e gëzove	Neither saw him grown up nor enjoyed him
Pesmetvite që na ike	Fifteen years you are gone
Jetën time ti ma fike	My life now has been turned off

Lamentation is required even for unsuccessful marriages. My interviewees surprised me with their responses. Men replied that a woman should respect her man, even if she doesn't have a good relationship with him or his family. Failure to lament would harm the family's reputation. However, the women's responses revealed interesting nuances. They explained that even if a woman does not love her husband, she must still lament to avoid gossips "*çfarë do thotë bota*?" (what will people say)?

Andro also told me "Sometimes we would say lyrics that only we knew the true meaning. Only the lamenters and their close friends

understood the true meaning behind the words they wailed" (personal communication, 2019). I wondered what this might be until I heard these lyrics.

Unë fat nuk kisha	I wasn't lucky
kur gjeta burrë te qisha	when I found a husband at the church

These lyrics have a double meaning: a stranger might think the singer means that she was unlucky for losing her husband ("at the church" implies a funeral service), but for her close circle, her friends would understand that she is referring to her bad luck in choosing the wrong husband. This coded in-group language used by women is a feature that serves as a means of conveying knowledge specific to the group of women who know each other, and it can also act as a vehicle for broader commentary. These coded messages reinforce the communal bonds and underscore the role of lamenters as both an emotional outlet and a nuanced form of cultural expression.

Through lamentation, the people elevate and celebrate the deceased. Their lyrics turn them into heroes in the eyes of the community. The following section will explore how laments contribute to the birth and celebration of these heroes.

Giving Birth to Heroes through Laments

In 1850, Georg von Hahn, the scholar known as the father of Albanian studies, noted that "the greatest mourning occurs when a man dies at an early and delicate age (Hahn 2004; 209). The close deceased women (wife, daughter, mother) would cut their hair short, scratch their cheeks until they bleed, howl, scream, and lament. Many families, especially wealthy families would even hire professional lamenters to ensure that they mourn the deceased *sic e takon* meaning appropriately. The practice of employing professional mourners is observed in many cultures worldwide, not just in Albanian tradition (Alexiou 2002; Köchümkulova 2015; McLaren 2008; Tolbert 2001).[15] Although the practice of professional mourners is occasionally observed among the Albanians of Macedonia and in northern Albania, my informants indicated that the concept of receiving money in the form of payment for lament is absent in the southern regions.

Lele has been practicing her profession for over thirty-five years. During our conversation about the nature of her compensation, she explained:

> I have never asked for payment. While there have been occasions where families chose to give a small gift, as a thank you, there were

[15] In Jewish communities, professional lamenters would bring in addition two flute players to lead the procession. Similarly, in Russia, professional lamenters would lament in the funeral procession, and the relatives of the deceased will cover their payment (Ajuwon; 1982: 275).

> also times when I received no payment at all" (personal communication, 2023).

She remembered lamenters were thanked with household condiments such as olive, oil, flour, rice, reflecting a system rooted in community support and reciprocity. She also noted that towards the end of the communist era, lamenters began to receive a small symbolic monetary amount instead of goods.

Lele explained why people—particularly affluent families—opt to hire professional lamenters. It is "to ensure that the deceased's life is properly celebrated and remembered" (personal communication, 2023). Lamenters had the power to create a grieving atmosphere with "genuine affection and real sorrow" (Ajuwon 1982; 277). In small communities, people know everyone, therefore, knowing the deceased allows for the creation of lyrics that highlight their life and actions. Despite this communal intimacy, it is not uncommon for professional lamenters to have never personally known the deceased (Vyshka and Çipi 2010: 243). Even if they do not know the deceased personally, these laments would create appropriate lyrics and blend them with a sorrowful melody to make the audience release their emotions. As locals described those laments: "Their cries would make even the skies cry".

Some of the lamenters would ask family members questions about the deceased, such as the number of family members, the marital status, and their profession. Lele explained "depending on their profession, we could

immediately compose lyrics that reflected their life and actions. Each profession had its own distinct language that we would use in our laments" (personal communication, 2023). These professional lamenters can easily capture the collective sorrow and shared memories that resonate within the community. They compose a lament honoring the individual's life and legacy by combining common cultural narratives, community experiences, and the memories passed on by family members. An important skill they possess is the art of empathetic expression, which allows them to capture the collective sorrow and shared memories that resonate within the community.

Nëna (Grandma) Bardha, one of the last remaining professional lamenters, described in an interview the emotional toll her work takes on her.

> "When I go to funerals, I have constant headaches and need to bring my pills. I am a mother myself. I can connect and sympathize with their pain. I have experienced loss and grief. I can use my experience and my grief to create something that reflects the emotions of the family and the community"(Personal interview 2023).

Her ability to tailor her performance to capture the unique aspects of everyone's life and the collective grief of those left behind underscores her skill and sensitivity as a lamenter. Professional lamenters, such as nëna Bardha and Lele, can articulate grief in a way that resonates with the bereaved, reinforcing the emotional and ceremonial aspects of the mourning process. These lamenters' skills help them comfort the bereaved, honor the

deceased, and transform them into a community "hero".

For Balkan countries that were under foreign subjugation for more than a century, laments became a means to provide condolence and strength, and therefore was linked to the social situation (Shehan 1989; 45–46). Fitim Çaushi observed, "When you have invaders, then you have elegies"(personal communication, 2019). An extensive collection of heroic laments was a response to military conflicts and the consequences of living with occupiers. In these elegies, a tragic character prevails. These elegies emphasize perseverance and courage and serve as a means of honoring the hero. This practice not only honors the deceased but also reinforces their significance within the community, connecting individual grief to the collective history and resilience of the Balkan people. An example of an elegy with a tragic-heroic element is the following where the verse "s'le pas të dytë," as a tragic-heroic element, is generally found in elegies where the tragic hero carries high social and aesthetic ideals.

Do të na shtipin Turqit	Turks will oppress us
Se ti nuk le pas të ditë	Because you left not second behind
Po ngrehu thieje varrë	but rise up and break your grave
Hidhe prapë atë pallë	Wield that sword once again.[16]

[16] This is a popular song from the Labëria region, as cited by Çaushi (2021:66). However, in my research, I was unable to find individuals who recognized a specific melody associated with this elegy. Instead, it appears that people recite it more as a poem or set of lyrics, without a fixed musical accompaniment.

The purpose of such lyrics is also motivational, aiming to inspire the present generation to the same heroic actions as those of their ancestors (Alexiou 2002; 126). According to professional lamenters, a hero sacrifices himself for the community; his love for his country makes the sacrifice meaningful, ensuring he is remembered as a hero. Consequently, the responsibility of remembering the deceased falls upon the shoulders of Albanian women. These laments express how the family wants their community to remember the deceased. This practice not only preserves the legacy of the individual but also reinforces communal bonds by reminding current and future generations of their shared history and values.

Mr. Çaushi explains that lament lyrics, at a high level, can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, the lyrics focus on how important the person was, what great sacrifices they made, and how their family and community have benefited from their presence. In the second stage, the lyrics shift tone from gratitude to wishful thoughts and prayers for the deceased as their soul embarks on its journey. The first stage serves to honor the deceased's legacy and express gratitude for their life and achievements, while the second stage reflects the dual purpose of laments: to celebrate the life of the deceased and to provide comfort and hope for their spiritual journey

beyond this world. This structure serves to honor the individual while reinforcing the community's collective memory and cultural continuity.

Conclusion

The tradition of laments provides insights into the different ways in which communities process loss, preserve memories, and strengthen cultural identities. The practice of lamenting a loss, has two main purposes. First, it is personal, as it helps alleviate pain and brings solace to the family of the deceased. Second, it constructs an image of the deceased by which the society will remember the deceased. Heroes are created through singing about their heroic acts, and songs carry words of bravery and kindness to the entire community. Naturally, such an effective way of expression is now an integral part of mourning in every family of southern Albania.

Tears and wails have never been associated with the men of Albania's patriarchal society as crying out loud is often ridiculed, mocked, and considered a sign of weakness. However, when women cry, they express their emotions freely; when they grieve and lament, they bring peace and honor to the family. For men lamentation is a coded language, but for women laments are vital form of expressing feelings and connecting with other women. Screams and howls will often announce a tragic event. The bereaved

will only wear black clothes and will avoid participation in celebrations. Therefore, women continue to live their lives in a way that represents a continuation of grieving.

By transforming personal loss into a collective experience, lamentation becomes a powerful tool for communal healing and solidarity. The themes of bravery, sacrifice, and perseverance that permeate Albanian laments reflect the historical and inspire future generations to follow the heroic deeds of their ancestors. Women will mourn by crying and singing lament songs out loud, expressing their sorrow for loved ones who have passed away. These women use their own experiences and grief, as well as shared histories, to craft laments that resonate with profound emotional intensity.

Women impart their knowledge to their daughters by participating in funerary rituals together. While this adds another aspect to the mother-daughter bond, it also creates a channel through which the knowledge of lament rituals is transmitted to the next generation. It is this unbreakable chain that has kept the tradition alive to this in southern Albania.

Chapter Four
Lamenting their Freedom: Voices of the Encamped Under Communism

"My name is Simon Mirakaj. I was born into a persecuted family and lived in the camps for 44 years. I have lived more years inside the camps than as a free man."[17] These were the words that greeted me as I sat across from Mr. Mirakaj, a former internee during the communist regime in Albania. "The conditions in Tepelena camp were awful. We had 5 bathrooms for 1500 people. If you had 5 lekë (5 cents), you would buy soap, not bread. Mothers would separate one bread loaf into three meals, and that bread was old and filled with flies." These were the conditions they lived for eight years in the camp of Tepelena before they were moved to other camps.

Tepelena is a popular location for weekend visitors and tourists offering a blend of modern luxury stay in the plush hotels and the natural beauty in southern Albania, 25-minute drive from the city of Gjirokastër.

[17] Simon Mirakaj was the General Director of the Institute of Integration of Former Political Persecutes (2002-2013), Chairman of the Anti-Communist Democratic Association of Former Political Persecutes of Albania. He was born in Shkodra on June 7, 1945, and when he was only two weeks old, he was interned with his family (including his mother Kune, sister Lajde, and brother Sokol) in the Berat camp. In 1949 they were moved to Tepelena, and then in the city of Lushnja. He completed high school in Lushnja in 1968. He was released after 44 years (nine internments) on July 4, 1989. After the fall of communism, in 1996, he graduated from the Faculty of Law, and in 1998, he completed the Police Academy. From 1993 to August 2002, he worked as an inspector in the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the rank of Major. On August 20, 2002, he was appointed General Director of the Institute of Integration of Former Political Persecutes, a position he held until 2013. On December 18, 2015, the President of the Republic awarded him the title "Knight of the Order of Skanderbeg." (personal communication, 2023)

Tepelena's historical sites, including the old Tepelena Castle and the springs of Uji I Ftohtë (Cold Water), make it the perfect refuge for people looking for some rest days (see Figure 15). However, Tepelena's present hides a dark past visitors might not observe: the internment camp where persecuted people spent years suffering inside.

Figure 15: The clear springs of Uji i Ftohtë, Tepelenë and the luxury hotel Uji i Ftohtë.

The Tepelena internment camp holds significant importance in this chapter, since all my interviewees resided there for several years. 68 years after the close of this camp, in February 2022, the city of Tepelena would inaugurate a permanent exhibition about the internment camp in the former

camp premises.[18] The exhibition provided a unique opportunity to engage with these individuals, many of whom would become the primary voices driving this narrative forward in the coming months. Their testimonies shed light on the resilience and oppression experienced within the camp and highlight broader themes of cultural suppression and resistance.

I divide this chapter into three sections. The first section begins with a historical overview of the communist regime. I analyze how the Albanian Communist Party (*Partia Komuniste Shqiptare (PKSH))* gained power through times and different alliances and emphasize the establishment of labor camps designed to exploit the labor of convicted political opponents, mirroring the Soviet Gulag system.

The second section focuses on the life of the people who lived inside the camp. Through archival work and interviews, I explore how laments were suppressed inside the camp. Fear for their family's life silenced women who could not express their feelings openly. The analysis shifts into the sonic elements of lamentation and the silence of this repertoire, revealing layers of oppression and the resilience of the women residing there.

The third section analyzes the challenges faced by survivors today as they navigate the complexities of grief and trauma. In addition, I explore

[18] The exhibition featured material from the Institute of History and archival data on those interned in the camp, including valuable sketches depicting life in the camp, skillfully executed by Lek Pervizi, an internee in Tepelena.

innovative initiatives spearheaded by artists and musicians to aid survivors in their healing journey while amplifying the memory of those who have been forgotten. These creative efforts provide therapeutic avenues for the survivors and play a crucial role in preserving and honoring the collective memory of their experiences.

Life Behind the Iron Curtain

The turbulent post World War II era helped to shape the ascent of PKSH to power. Over time, the German and Italian invasions resulted in the creation of Albanian resistance force. The communists controlled the resistance effort by grouping together partisan units and using guerilla warfare until 1944 where they ultimately seized power (Fischer 2022; 264-273). [19] Enver Hoxha's vision for Albania resulted in a radical change of the sociopolitical scene with

[19] The Communist partisans defeated the last Balli Kombëtar (National Front) forces in 1944. The Balli Kombëtar, or National Front, was a nationalist and anti-communist resistance movement in Albania during World War II. It was established in 1942 as a coalition of various nationalist groups and individuals with the goal of opposing the Axis occupation of Albania. The Balli Kombëtar initially cooperated with communist partisan forces, including the National Liberation Movement led by the Communist Party of Albania, in their common struggle against the Italian and German occupiers. However, as the war progressed, ideological and political differences emerged between the Balli Kombëtar and the communist-led resistance. The Balli Kombëtar sought to establish a constitutional monarchy after the war, while the communists, under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, aimed for a socialist state. These differences eventually led to a split between the two factions, and by 1943, armed conflicts had erupted between them. After the war, as the Communists gained control of Albania, the Balli Kombëtar faced suppression and persecution. (for more see Fischer 2022, Abrahams 2015).

policies and reforms establishing a strict and repressive government reminiscent of today's North Korea (Fischer 2022; 278).[20]

After 1972, the period of self-reliance was difficult, and people in Albania still remember it as it took a toll on their lives.[21] While food was rationed, Hoxha's regime built over 173,000 concrete bunkers, a wasteful effort for a country already grappling with severe poverty (Fischer 2022; 313). The country was isolated and lacked economic basfe to sustain itself or develop without external aid. In the 1980s, my paternal grandfather, who was then the head of an agricultural cooperative, voiced a bold opinion during a Party meeting. He argued that the Party should not waste money on bunkers while people are suffering and living in poverty. The next day, the director of the Party pressured him to resign during a disciplinary meeting to avoid imprisonment. He stepped down, and the same week, he was relocated from the city of Gjirokastër to Vrisera (a remote village in borders with Greece), where he was assigned to work as a farmer.[22] This story that happened to my

[20] Enver Hoxha, born in Gjirokastër in 1908, attended the national Lycee in Korcë andin 1930 he continued his studies in Montpelier in France. After losing his scholarship, he moved to Paris. Paris had become the new hub for Albanian communists. Hoxha returned to Albania in 1936 without concluding his studies, worked as French teacher at his former school in Korcë, and he joined the Albanian partisans when the war started (see Fevziu, 2016).

[21] The food was rationed, and a family would have a ratio that included one kilogram of meat, 200 grams of butter, 150 grams of cheese, and ten eggs per week (interview with Violeta Prifti, Gjirokastër 2023).

[22] Due to his hard work throughout the years, strong ethics, and the fact that he had two small children in school, my grandfather was able to negotiate with the Party. After many conversations and calling in favors, the Party granted him the option to let his family remain in the city while he worked in the villages surrounding the city.

family is not unique; many similar stories occurred throughout the country during this period.

The communist regime sustained its authoritarian control over the population through mechanisms of fears by instituting and perpetuating a marginalized class within communities, who served as exemplars of the repercussions faced by individuals who deviated from the party's directives (Saltmarshe, 2001; 172). Starting from the summer of 1944, Hoxha started a purge. Mehmet Shehu ordered to deport individuals who housed refugees in the mountains, or "war criminals," as well as those who refused to turn up the weapons in February 1945, the earliest data we have regarding the execution of this step.[23] A mission to detain and execute fascist collaborators, politically inactive intellectuals, anti-Yugoslavs, and former army officers who had refused to take sides during the war.[24]

> "Set up prisons and concentration camps and imprison all those charged with serious offenses, high treason, and open collaboration. Do not show mercy to anyone who collaborated with the occupiers; execute them on the spot. (..)" (Fevziu 2016; 103).[25]

[23] CSA, F. 14/AP (Str), V. 1945, D. 215, fl. 31. Order of Mehmet Shehu, Commander of IIIrd Corpus, Shkodra, for staffs of I, XI, XXIII, XXIV Brigades, 12 February 1945.
[24] A group of 52 people were detained and executed on the spot without explanation, trial, or court decision.
[25] Achieve of Central State, order no 96 to General Dali Ndreu sent by Enver Hoxha on Nov 17th 1944 ((Fevziu 2016; 103).

These individuals were denied the right to return to their homes, which were confiscated and used to shelter officials of the new regime. Eight existing prisons in Albania were designated for political prisoners, labeled as *Armiq te popullit* (public enemy/enemy aliens), while seven prisons were reserved for "ordinary" prisoners.[26] Over the years, the regime expanded its prison system and established labor camps where prisoners were subjected to forced labor in activities such as public work, mineral extraction, and agriculture.

The idea of those labor camps was taken from the Gulag system that since 1930s, evolved as a tool for political repression and economic development under Stalin's regime. Initially, the Gulag system expanded to control the peasantry through collectivization and dekulakization,[27] however, the Soviet leadership soon recognized its dual benefits: neutralizing political threats and providing a cheap labor force for "ambitious industrialization projects" (Bell 2019; 21-27).

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[26] This information is taken from the Bunk'Art 2 museum located in Tirana in the Sermedin Said Toptani" Street. Bunk'Art 2 is a reimagined Communist-era nuclear bunker in Tirana, transformed into a museum and art space. It reflects Albania's initiative to use culture to celebrate new beginnings while remembering its solemn past, featuring exhibits on political persecutions and the state's security measures during the Communist regime. I reached out to Bunk'Art multiple times requesting permission to publish pictures from there, but unfortunately, I did not receive any response from the officials.

[27] Kulak literally means fist in Russian. Dekulakization refers to a policy carried out by the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin during the late 1920s and early 1930s as part of the collectivization of agriculture. It aimed to eliminate the kulaks, a term used to describe wealthier peasants or landowners who were seen as class enemies of the Soviet proletariat and obstacles to socialist collectivization.

In Albania, the official purpose of the detention of political prisoners was the "re-education and rehabilitation" through suffering and work. Located in remote areas, living in harsh conditions with high mortality rates, and brutal treatment of prisoners, the government considered those prisons as necessary for the nation's economic and social transformation, framing it within the context of building socialism and preparing for future conflicts (Bell 2019; 30). Over the course of nearly five decades of Hoxha's rule, over 70,000 individuals were detained in camps across the country, with a significant number facing execution (Fevziu 2011).[28]

The creation of internment camps by various governments throughout history has often been used as a means of targeting specific groups. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US government declared all citizens of Japanese ancestry as "enemy aliens" and placed more than 120,000 Japanese Americans in permanent camps (Nunes 2024; 150). These camps, located in isolated towns, were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded for security. Despite the harsh conditions, Japanese Americans were permitted some cultural expressions, such as playing traditional Japanese games, establishing

[28] In those years 5,037 men and 450 women were executed; 16,788 men and 7,367 women were convicted and sentenced to three to thirty-five years of imprisonment, 354 foreign nationals were executed by firing squad(..) most likely by direct orders and telegram from Hoxha himself (Fevziu, 2011; 259).

libraries, and building amphitheaters (ibid 151–152). The camps proved to be a place where musical practices could continue (Waseda 2000; 141).

This is not exactly the situation inside the internment camps of Albania. Families and relatives of those labeled as "enemies" were also transferred to these camps. If they were associated with the guilty person, this became their fate for the rest of their lives. This designation carried severe social and political consequences, isolating families and subjecting them to continuous surveillance and discrimination (Saltmarshe 2001; 172). These individuals endured physical deprivation, intense labor, and severe psychological trauma. Separation from loved ones and the constant fear of execution or further punishment fostered an environment of despair and terror.

One reason this regime is often characterized as "the most oppressive" is the conditions in the Albanian camps. In Soviet Gulags, deported kulaks could recover the right to vote, subject to good behavior. Their children retained the right to education, and if they were accepted to higher educational institutions outside their place of settlement, they were allowed to leave. After 1938, all children were free to leave the settlement (Fitzpatrick 1999; 124). In contrast, prisoners in Albanian internment camps had no rights and were not permitted to leave, even if they demonstrated good behavior. Their children were also confined within the camps and were banned from

pursuing secondary education. Prisoners endured physical deprivation, intense labor, and severe psychological trauma.

And while the echoes of the actions within the camps speak volumes about the human cost of Hoxha's draconian policies, outside the camps, the Albanian government aimed to "elevate" the population to embody the ideal of the "new socialist" and fulfill the vision of constructing the "new society" (Olson 2004; 37). The Albanian government, following Marxist-Leninist principles, viewed the arts as revolutionary tools for advancing civilization and consolidating national identity (Tochka 2012; 57–60). The arts, literature, theater, and music were strictly controlled by the Party and utilized as propaganda tools. The government invested significantly in establishing art schools, cultural hubs, and folk ensembles, as well as introducing music and dance competitions and producing state-sponsored television shows and films (Rice 1994; Buchanan 2006; Merchant 2017).

The regime aimed to amalgamate customs from both northern and southern regions into a unified "people's culture," promoting music that aligned with the Party's goals while strongly opposing and banning other forms. The traditional shouting of men in the north, known as *gjama*, was prohibited, and while the lamentation of women was not explicitly banned, it was restricted and limited (Kondi 2008; 46). Lamentation was encouraged for the fallen heroes of socialism, for the sons and daughters of the leader, Enver

Hoxha, and for the ideals of the new Party of Labor and New Albania (Kondi 2008; 46–47). This ideological shift eventually gave rise to a novel way of expressing grief, in which traditional heroes were transformed through lamentation into "heroes of the socialist world."

> "When we lost a son or a friend who was a good comrade, we would consider their death heroic. Parents would not cry, would not mourn, and we friends and family would celebrate his life and death. Parents would reply to *Te na rroje Partija! (*Long live the Party) to the condolences they received" (Personal interview with Stefan Lani, Gjirokastër 2023).

This stoic attitude reflects the deep ideological commitment to the regime in which personal loss was subordinated to the collective ideals of the socialist state. However, what was happening in the families of the persecuted people? Those people who were publicly labeled as "public enemies"? How could they ever be perceived as "heroes" in the eyes of their mothers and sisters? The narrative within these camps starkly contrasted with the propaganda presented in the public domain. While good comrades were celebrated as heroes, the families saw their loved ones disappear from their lives. Grief and mourning were profoundly affected, as individuals had to alter their authentic expressions of sorrow and suppress emotions on a daily basis.

The Silence Inside the Camps

"The camp of Tepelena was truly horrifying. This camp cannot be described in words," my interlocutors Simon and Sokol Mirakaj described Tepelena's camp that they had spent days and nights trying to survive. Tepelena's camp Nr 6 operated from 1949 to 1953 and gathered many women, elderly, and children, family members of sentenced and escapees, estimated to be around 1500 families (see Figure 16).[29]

Figure 16: The camp today. Photo taken by the author.

[29]Information from the online Online Archive of Victims of Communism: https://kujto.al/burg-kamp/kampi-i-tepelenes/

The camp was surrounded by wire and controlled by armed soldiers. "We used to bring tree stumps where we had to carry them on our shoulders in temperatures below freezing," Klora Merlika, a 90-year-old woman survivor said. "If a woman begged them not to put another log on their back, the officers would laugh and put a heavier log on them."

During the summer of 1949, between 33 - 60 children tragically lost their lives in a single night, and from October to December 1950, an additional 285 succumbed to dysentery in the internment camp (see Figure 17).[30] Simon Mirakaj says

> "With more than three deaths occurring on some days, bodies were often stacked atop each other. Initially located in front of the camp gate, the graveyard quickly reached its capacity. Officers started burying bodies near the river, but during winter, the water will rise and carry away all remnants. So many lives went unmarked, without a proper resting place" (interview in Tirana, February 2023)."

Mirakaj's story offers insight into the living conditions within Tepelena camp. His testimony highlights the absence of proper burial practices and funeral customs. The reality of unmarked graves and missing remains underscores a broader theme of erasure and enforced silence by the government, that sought to erase any memory of those who suffered under its persecution. In these painful conditions, human emotions were profoundly transformed, becoming a catalyst for resistance.

[30] Tepelena Camp Museum, August 2023.

Figure 17: Trees are planted here in memory of the children who lost their lives in this camp. Photo by the author.

As I gathered oral histories from people who survived the camps, their memories unfolded in recurring narrative patterns: acts of violence, inhumane behaviors, and treasured memories intertwined with aggression, pain, and trauma. Trauma is neither a single nor an isolated occurrence. Instead, it entails an enduring and continuous engagement with the pressing

and urgent nature of traumatic events (Caruth 2014; xiii–xiv). As Caruth notes, trauma is "more than a pathology or the simple illness of a wounded psyche" (Caruth 1996; 4). Building on Caruth's interpretation, I view trauma as a wound that speaks, conveying a reality or truth that would otherwise remain silenced. For those persecuted individuals, trauma often emerges in a delayed form.

How traumatic can it be for a mother, inside those camps, to lose both her children in one night, and how can she overcome such traumatic experiences? Trauma scholars believe that those who survived a horrific occurrence typically describe themselves as not being the same individuals they were before (Brison 1999; Langer 1995). How could they remain the same when mothers had to conceal the bodies of their deceased children and suppress their grief to ensure the food ration for the next day? Laments that once served as a catalyst for processing pain were suppressed. The mournful melodies that women would have naturally performed in solidarity were silenced by a collective decision to bear the burden of grief silently. The communist regime did not explicitly request that women refrain from lamenting, but survival necessitated the suppression of such expressions.

The women in Tepelena's camp faced a dual struggle in search of survival where silence became a necessity. The population inside the camp was mostly women, children, and the elderly, as men were often imprisoned

elsewhere, exiled, or killed. As explored in Chapter Three, lamentation served as a crucial mechanism for coping with separation and loss sharing life experiences, acknowledging actions, and elevating the deceased to heroic status. However, in the camps, expressing affection for those deemed political enemies was dangerous. Mirakaj told me, "How could they express love and their true feelings towards their husband when he was considered an enemy?" (Mirakaj, August 2023). Transforming an enemy into a hero—whether as a father, husband, or community member—was strictly forbidden. Families often faced prohibitions against burying their deceased relatives, leaving many searching for the remains of their loved ones. Expressing sentiments contrary to the regime's narrative could result in severe consequences.

Strength became a necessity for survival and the protection of their children, compelling these women to suppress their pain and nurture a growing resentment toward the regime. In the face of persecution, women refused to reveal their pain to the enemy, denying them any satisfaction. As Mr. Mirakaj noted, "The camps' officers were the real criminals. They were happy with our misery. Our mothers were lionesses; they would never show their pain and misfortune" (personal interview, 2023).

Violeta Prifti remembers her mother’s reaction when her father was arrested and sent into prison. She said that for eight continuous years, her

mother remained silent on the subject and did not show any outward signs of sadness in public, even if her husband was not considered an "enemy" of the state (personal communication, 2023). This emotional suppression symbolizes the burden those families experience. For those families, expressing grief and discussing their feelings with people was often associated with danger. The trauma this regime inflicted in addition with labor and discrimination, was exacerbated by an internal struggle to articulate and alleviate their pain. The absence of an outlet for genuine grief and emotion added another layer of anguish to their silent suffering.

According to scholars of trauma, traumatic memory is hard to articulate and is "inhibited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence about the truth prevails" (Laub 1995; 64). As ethnomusicologist Badema Pitic also argues, "the transition from traumatic memory to narrative memory (..) signals the survivors' intention to "claim" a traumatic event and, therefore, to begin the process of healing" (Pitic 2017; 146). Through narratives and discussions, the survivor can live a "life with a before and after" (Brison 1999; 46).

The transition from traumatic memory to narrative memory offers a valuable framework for understanding today's tradition of lamentation practices. Traumatic memory is immediate, and often overwhelming the people who experience trauma. Many interlocuters I interviewed did not

remember lyrics their mothers would create. Mr. Mirakaj explained that "(women) chose to keep those words private, fearing that someone could hear them, and their families could suffer or fearing that their pain could be amusement for the officers." Without the structured practice of lamentation, individuals struggled to move from the raw immediacy of trauma to a reflective narrative. This absence limits opportunities for emotional healing and weakens the communal bonds and shared traditions that lamentation once supported, leaving a gap in how grief is expressed and remembered.

In the next section, I examine surviving laments as a powerful narrative tool for survivors to express and process their trauma. These laments provide an outlet through which individuals can vocalize their memories, experiences, and the profound impact of those events on their lives.

Unheard Laments and Survivors Today

It took more than two decades for museums for the socialist time to emerge, elucidating the regime and its atrocities, inviting persecuted families to share their experiences, documenting songs and poems crafted within prisons and camps, and arranging events to honor those who endured persecution. Many people in those years have been lost, as well as their music, laments, poems, jokes, and anecdotes. Historian Shirli Gilbert observes how collectors in the

immediate aftermath of the Holocaust were keen not only on documenting songs but also on capturing daily life moments and folktales as a form of "mirror of …Jewish life" (Gilbert 2008; 112) She also delves into the role of music as a mediator of memory and contributes to the process of memorialization (Gilbert 2008; 109).

Ethnomusicologist Ioannida Costache, in her dissertation, extends the claims of Caruth and another literary theorist to the aural realm (Costache 2019; 113). Concentrating on the songs of the Roma during the Holocaust, Costache is raising greater awareness about the atrocities that the Roma community endured during that time—many of which remain largely unknown even today. I can further assert that beyond the realm of poems and songs, there exists a profound narrative of lamentations within the iron walls of the communist camps.

Over the course of my fieldwork, the recounting of lamentations by survivors of the camps or prisons proved to be a rarity. Many survivors, then just children, when I asked, they said they did not pay enough attention to the lyrics their mothers would create. In 2022, I finally had the opportunity to hear a lament performed by Klora Merlika, a 90-year-old survivor of the Tepelena internment camp. The lyrics became a site for historical reflection and self-examination, serving as a vessel for the collective remembrance of trauma among the survivors.

Lyrics

O ju male që m'rrethoni!	O you mountains that surround me!
Në k'të vend të shkret' pse m'keni prue?	In this desolate place, why did you bring me?
Çfar' ju bona, s'diftoni	What have I done to you, you don't reveal
me tel xhamash m'keni rrethue	with walls of glass, you've encircled me
(...)Bënça vjen valë-valë,	(...)Benca comes wave by wave,
varret tona i ka marrë	our graves it has taken away
S'të erdhi keq, s'pate mëshirë,	No pity came to you, no mercy,
varret më kush nuk i di	our graves, no one knows them
Gjithë në Vjosë na i çove ti..."	All in Vjosa you carried us..."

This song expresses sorrow and pain. The woman conveys her loneliness and solitude, reflecting on the role of nature in shaping these emotions. The motif of graves being swept away by the river accentuates the suffering and intensifies the tragedy these families experienced. The voice is not shouting or wailing but more like a whisper. It feels as though the woman is sharing a secret with the mountains (see Figure 18). The higher notes are performed not with a chest voice but with a nasal voice, evoking the sound of weeping and enhancing the song's sorrowful and grieving tone (see Figure 19).

Figure 18: View of the mountains from the camp. Photo taken by the author, 2023.

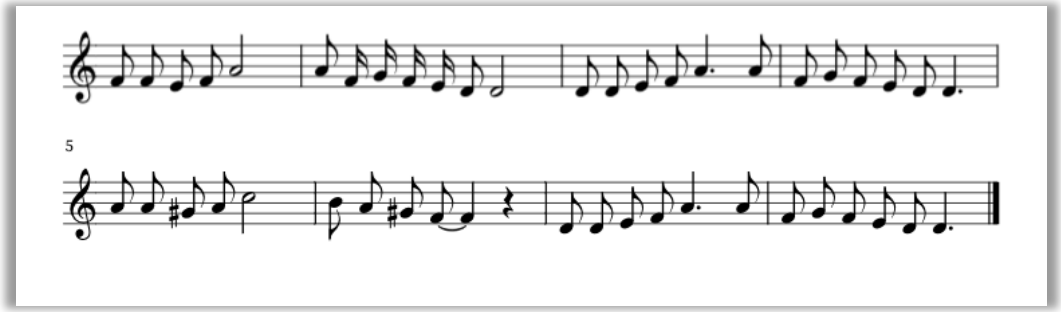

Figure 19: Lament. Transcription by the author. Recorded in Tirana, 2023.

I encountered this lament again in May 2023 in a concert commemorating the 50th anniversary of the revolt in the prison of Spaçi.

Survivors from various prisons and camps participated along with musicians from the University of Tirana. This lament adapted by Professor Endri Sina, was presented through a musical ensemble featuring piano, violin, cello, and soprano.[31] The lament starts with Klora Merlika's voice, where she performs the first verse. The piece opens with an Adagio with two resonant chords and a dialogue between the cello and violin (see Figure 20).[32]

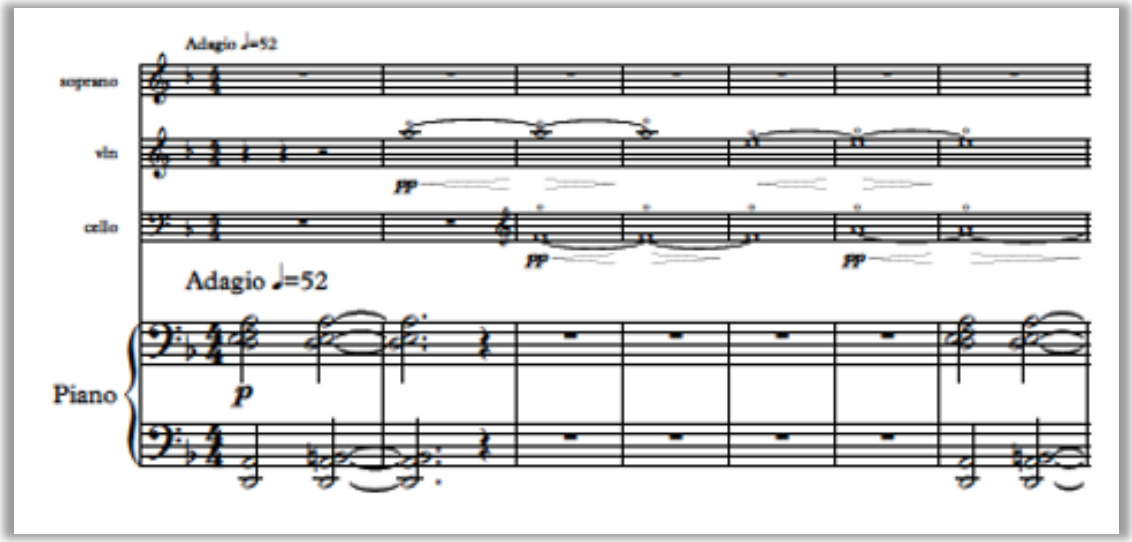

Figure 20: Composition by Endri Sina.

The violin playing *flautando* creates this idea of a haunting and cold atmosphere. The dynamics are pianissimo and piano, symbolizing the silence around them. The thematic elements, highlighted by terms like lamentoso

[31] Performers: Mezzo - Vikena Kamenica, Piano - Lea Kilica, Violin - Fatos Bardulla. Cello - Dorina Laro.
[32] Adagio tempo, marked at quarter note = 52

and quasi ad lib, evoke a sense of mourning and sorrow (See Appendix for the complete intro). Following her rendition, the same verse is performed ad libitum by the mezzo soprano. After the first two verses, one sung by the survivor Klora Merlika and the second ad libitum by the soprano, the piece transitions into a dialogue between the piano, violin, and cello. The violin plays muted, in a lower register, with a "lamentoso" style, evoking this sense of loneliness and sorrow. The cello adds a percussive tone that supports the melody with the pizzicato notes while the piano provides the harmonic foundation, completing the dialogue between the violin and cello.

Mrs. Merlika contributed to this lament by crafting the final four verses of this lament (Bença vjen… i cove ti). In multiple interviews, she has shared her tragic experience - the loss of her grandmother. Before she passed, her only wish was to bury her in her homeland and not the camp. Her remains, though, were buried and exhumed three times, including the devastating moment when the river surged and carried away her remains.

This lament is frequently performed at various events and presentations in cities across Albania. When I approached Professor Endri Sina for permission to perform the piece at an international concert, he was enthusiastic about the idea. Performing this lament not only commemorates the experiences and lives of those prisoners but also shares their stories beyond Albania's borders. This performance keeps their life stories alive,

giving them a voice on the global stage and ensuring their struggles are remembered and honored.

After the fall of the regime, many survivors returned to their original homes, but few, if any, were able to reclaim their properties. Even more challenging was their inability to live a life that was not profoundly tied to the memories and traumas of their past. Mr. Mirakaj mentioned that most of his fellow survivors were deeply disappointed with how Albania treated them after communism. A lot of the survivors expressed dissatisfaction with the compensation and financial restitution for the depth of suffering they had to endure for years.

> My grandfather was executed, my father was interned, I was interned, and my children were born in internment, and of all this long period of persecution, only eight years of imprisonment are the compensations are calculated only for my executed grandfather" said one survivor that wanted to remain anonymous (Tirana, 2023).

In 2009, a legislative effort was undertaken to compensate political prisoners from the Communist period financially.[33] The compensation plans involved annual installment payments, each corresponding to one year spent in prison, with a maximum limit of eight years. Similar annual compensation

[33] For the exact details and specific provisions, you would need to refer to the original document provided by the Ministry of Justice check here: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Ligj_per_demshperblimin_e_ish_te_denuarve_politike_te_regjimit_komunist-1.pdf .

would receive families of executed political prisoners. Despite these measures, survivors even today remain disappointed with the post-communist government and their solution to address past injustices.

In addition to the trauma of being separated from society for years and losing their homes, former political prisoners faced significant societal stigma even after their release. Many of them upon their return to their cities were still labeled as "criminals" that deserved that suffering or "unworthy" members of the society even after receiving their freedom. The lack of societal acceptance perpetuates a painful narrative that further compounds the enduring trauma of those who have already suffered immeasurably during the dark days of the communist regime.

I did not need to spend months with those survivors to understand that they still are going through complicated grief. Throughout our interviews, a recurring theme emerged expressions of longing for lost family members, coupled with feelings of disbelief and anger towards the system responsible for the deaths of their loved ones, disappointment towards today's system. The sense of loneliness that permeated their narratives mirrored classic symptoms of traumatic grief.

Only recently, researchers have been able to direct their attention to exploring the similarities and differences between grief and trauma. When both grief and trauma are combined, this is called "complicated grief"

(Fleming & Belanger, 2001). Based on research on grief, trauma, and complicated grief, there are two contrasting perspectives regarding the impact of death and traumatic experiences on a survivor's personal death anxiety (Tolstikova and others 2005; 297). Research by psychologists Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson (1999) discovered that many bereaved individuals lost their fear of death after going through tragic experiences. On the contrary, other researchers, like Lifton (1993), assert that death anxiety is a significant outcome of trauma, especially when the traumatic event involves a confrontation with life and death. When someone faces the death of a loved one or a life-threatening event, they are compelled to reevaluate their worldview to make sense of the experience.

"I will never forget they eyes of my mother. Her eyes were always filled with tears" (Mirakaj, 2023). Today, more than thirty-five years after the internment camps and prisons, the survivors grapple with the enduring weight of complicated grief. The traumas inflicted during those dark times have left marks on the survivors, creating a complex emotional landscape that goes beyond the conventional understanding of grief. Even in the contemporary context, as Albania navigates its post-communist reality, the survivors face the challenge of reconciling the past with the present while contending with the socio-political intricacies of acknowledging historical wrongs.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a picture I received after my interview with Simon Mirakaj (see Figure 21). This picture is taken during the day of pictures in the Tepelena Camp. From left to right is my interlocuter Simon Mirakaj, his cousin Katrina, and his brother Sokol. After sending me the picture, he wrote: "How much pain our mothers saw raising their children in those terrible conditions. They have been and will stay forever in our memories as heroes." (Mirakaj, 2023).

Figure 21: From right to left (Simon, Katrina, and Sokol Mirakaj. Picture from the Tepelena Camp. Used with the permission of Simon Mirakaj.

Women have been the leaders in performing lamentation as a natural and expressive form to communicate feelings of suffering and loss. This chapter analyzes the complexity of how an authoritarian government suppressed and changed those spontaneous displays of mourning. Following narratives from survivors of the communist camps and prisons in Albania, this chapter understands how the silence and suppression of emotions transformed grieving into a subversive act. This act created a paradox inside those camps where the attempts of the regime to suppress the people inside fueled resilience and endurance among those prisoners. The stories of those women shed light on the remarkable resilience of the human spirit in the face of oppression and aggression. Recognizing the impact of historical persecution becomes a vital way where communities can heal even after so many years.

This chapter gives voice to a marginalized group and a repertoire often dismissed. Inside the walls of these camps women had to overcome daily challenges. From the daily survival, finding methods to keep their children alive, and maintaining a strong front in front of the oppressor. The freedom to create and express laments in such a terrible place was almost impossible. These women refused to show pain to their oppressors, keeping the grief and suffering hidden deep inside them.

Building on research on memories of trauma and grief, the few lyrics

and melodies that have survived, and the narratives of those people allow for an understanding of the depth of suffering that even today remains unknown. The songs that are presented in this chapter are songs of resistance. This approach reveals the possibility to decipher the layers of resistance enabling and giving people and their history a voice. In conclusion, the exploration of lamentation within an oppressive regime unveils the human resilience, silent resistance, and the enduring power of cultural expressions.

Chapter Five
Reshaping Grief: The Dynamic Interaction of Modernity, Migration, and COVID-19

"Laments are dead, and people do not care about them anymore," Lele remarked plainly as we sat in her living room. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2022, I aimed to investigate the current state of laments, and some musicians arranged for me to meet Lele, one of the last living lamenters in the area. I had frequently heard the statement "laments are dead" during my time in Albania as many people, especially younger generation, believed that lamentation practices are no longer relevant in contemporary Albanian society. Lele recounted the days when laments were a vital part of communal life.

This chapter has three sections, and each chapter is dedicated to exploring significant factors contributing to the decline of lament traditions. The first part looks at the conflict between preserving legacy and embracing current identities as well as the generational variations in value for this legacy. The second section focuses on another factor that contributed to the decline of the laments: migration. Migration (inside or outside the country) left many older adults alone to reshape this tradition by intensifying the daily grief experienced due to family separation. The third section delves into the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on grief. This section examines how the pandemic has challenged traditional avenues of grieving within the Albanian context and clarifies the elements affecting the maintenance and change of cultural traditions in modern Albania.

Modernity: A Threat to Lament Tradition

Before delving into modernity and the tradition of laments it is important to define how the words "modernity," "tradition," "western," and "backward" are used and understood by Albanian people. For many of my interlocutors, modernity is associated with progress, development, and alignment with contemporary global standards. Naxhi Kasoruho said, "Modernity is seen as a positive force driving Albania towards a better future" (personal communication 2021). Tradition, on the other side, encompasses customs, rituals, and social norms passed down through generations. As I show in this chapter, some traditions are highly valued and serve as a source of identity and continuity, and other traditions are linked directly to "backwardness."[34]

The concept of backwardness encompasses a sense of a consciousness of lack, which has been a dominant theme not only in Eastern European historiographies but also in the self-perceptions of various nations (Todorova, 2018). Because of the "geographic east of Europe and the world situated to the east was lagging behind Europe primarily in economic performance, East came to be identified more often, and more exclusively with industrial backwardness, lack of advanced social relations, and institutions typical or the developed capital West" (Todorova 2023; 11-12).

Consequently, Eastern Europe's attempts at modernizing and catching up are framed as efforts to accelerate time, achieving in decades what

[34] See in Introduction for more theory and analysis.

Western Europe accomplished over centuries. For my interlocutors, both the state-socialist period (1944-1991) and the post socialist period (1992-present) in Albania are characterized by such doctrines. Under socialism, the emphasis was on creating enlightened *(të ndriçuar)* citizens through comprehensive state control over education, culture, and social life (Tochka 2012; 130). Folk music needed to be performed "in order to inspire the population" (Zemetsovsky and Kunanbaeva 1997; 11) Uplifting "backward" music to proper standard became "part of the project of uplifting peoples who were seen as backward and uneducated" (Merchant 2015; 86). Albania turned toward neoliberal ideas and a desire to "return to Europe" (Tochka 2012; 325) as communism fell apart. In this stage, one becomes an advanced nation by merging into the European and worldwide capitalist systems. Moving from the communist concept of uplifting "backward" music to the "return to Europe" the musical practices of Albanian nation had a profound shift.

Embracing Western culture in post-socialist Albania was primarily seen as a strategic move to dissociate from the nation's socialist past. Western narratives have often depicted the Balkans as a region mired in backwardness, "bound by tradition, and rife with enduring ethnic conflicts" (Grgić 2022; 20). These images depict a mix of Western and Eastern traits, therefore framing the Balkans as a transitional area between the West and "the Orient" (see Coles 2001; Todorova 1996). Throughout different historical phases, Albanian leaders have kept one eye on the West and have portrayed their country and its people as culturally backward or "uncivilized" to justify adopting "modern" political programs (Tochka 2012; 11). Just as utopian

socialism once aimed to transform people's mindsets to create a "new person," the post-socialist push in Albania towards neoliberal policies is focused on reshaping its citizens into "free" individuals who support and engage in capitalism to align more closely with European standards.

Lamenters, friends, and family had interesting answers when asked about the boarders of the West.[35] They often consider several key aspects that reflect their perceptions. Western countries are frequently associated with high levels of economic development and prosperity. Additionally, they are viewed as exemplars of stable democratic governance, with political systems marked by transparency, rule of law, and protection of human rights. This admiration for Western political models' fuels aspirations for political reforms with Albanians often adopting Western cultural norms, lifestyles, and consumer habits.[36]

Lele's "lament" about the diminishing value of traditional practices, such as lamenting stigmatized as backward, reflects a more profound cultural shift where conventional and modernity devalued traditional customs. Anthropologist James Wilce's insight into the concepts of "backward" versus "forward-looking" or "progressive" orientations relates to the way humans perceive their movement and directionality—literally and metaphorically (Wilce 2009; 139). Wilce underscores how traditional practices, like lamenting,

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[35] For most of them Albania was not associated with West. Western nations would be the United States, Canada, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, even Germany but not Greece nor Romania or Croatia.

[36] I would also add that I did find a similarity in separating the countries in different words based on the French demographer Alfred Sauvy who separated the First World to include the United States and its capitalists allies, Second World included communist Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites and The Third World, meanwhile, encompassed all the other countries that were not actively aligned with either side in the Cold War (Sauvy 1952; Three Worlds, One Planet).

can be unfairly labeled as "backward" when they do not align with these modernist, progressive ideals (Wilce 2009; 140). Often driven by this paradox between backwardness and progressiveness, countries may keep or forsake cultural traditions as they negotiate their identities under the demands of globalization and modernism.

Before the socialist period, lamentation was integral to mourning rituals in southern Albania, where primarily female lamenters would intricately narrate the deceased's life through song. These public displays of grief not only reinforced social bonds but also provided comfort to those grieving (See Chapter Three). However, under the socialist regime (1946-1991), such practices were encouraged but limited to promoting gratitude to the heroes of socialism and silencing the party's enemies, as demonstrated in Chapter Four.

During the transition from socialism to post-socialism between the 1980s and 1990s there was an influx of Western Products and media, significantly altering Albanian society. Italian and Yugoslavian music broadcasts introduced new genres that reshaped local music scenes and influenced youth culture (Tochka 2016; 129-166). The availability of Western goods changed consumption habits, with a preference for imported items reflecting a desire to align with global trends. As foreign products began to permeate Albania's major cities, the Albanian people experienced a profound shift in mentality. The exposure to diverse goods and cultural influences from abroad prompted them to adopt new perspectives and expectations.

As a child in the early 1990s the most popular children in my school owned items from abroad. Inside houses, Coca-Cola cans were used as home décor, and brands like Levi's jeans were indicators of financial status. TV series like "Baywatch" and "La Piovra" (The Octopus) gained massive popularity, presenting Albanian audiences with lifestyles drastically different from what they had known. In the Albanian context, modernity's essence is a continuous search for progress and social growth that mirrors Western countries.[37] The exposure to western life and modernization gradually influenced social cohesion everywhere around the country where people started to display Western clothing, furnishing, and even attitude by incorporating English words in their daily vocabulary.

Traditional Albanian customs and norms began to blend with Western values, reflecting a dynamic interplay between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modernity. My interlocutor, *Elma (age 30), whom I met in 2022 explained "Those (women) who continue to perform laments are clinging to the past and have not embraced the realities of modern Albania" (personal communication, Gjirokastër, 2022). [38] She highlighted that modernity has introduced significant positive changes promoting gender

[37] For many years, the Italian TV show "La Piovra" has been extremely popular in Albania, becoming one of the most watched programs. It was so integral to daily life that a common saying emerged during that period "*mbyll syte shikoj Katanin, hap syte shikoj katranin"*[I close my eyes, and I see Cattan (the lead protagonist), I open my eyes I see my poor husband]. Both men and women would be at home to watch the show on time, leading to discussions about the episodes the following day.

[38] Elma (who wanted to remain anonymous) reached out to me after a presentation I gave in the University of Gjirokastër. She said that her grandmother was a famous lamenter in the region of Vlora. Her grandmother unfortunately passed away couple of years ago, but she would still remember how her laments would make everyone around her grandmother cry and sorrow.

equality and enabling women to take on more active societal roles in the workplace and beyond.

By stating that these women are "clinging to the past" and have not embraced modern Albanian realities, Elma implies a supposed resistance to move away from old behaviors that no longer fit with current modern trends. Elma's upbringing in a family where laments were a frequent and respected practice offers a unique perspective on the cultural significance of lamentation in her community. From a young age, she was exposed to her grandmother receiving requests to perform laments at local funerals. However, she never learned how to lament.

> "My mother was sent to school in Tirana, and she did not continue the tradition of laments. I was not even interested in learning. Although I do understand that this is a tradition that we have had for centuries, to me still looks primitive. We need to walk in modernity, not going back to past" (personal communication, 2023).

The statement reflects a generational shift in attitudes towards traditional practices, highlighting the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modernity. The speaker's mother, educated in Tirana, did not continue the tradition of laments, indicating a break from long-standing customs. This discontinuity suggests that higher education and exposure to urban and modern surroundings influenced individuals to move away from lamenting practices. Moufarrej is observing a similar attitude from educated women. She mentions that "Women's access to education resulted in a lack of interest among the young generation to carry on the tradition of

lament, which no longer matched their new feminist values" (Moufarrej 2024: 85).

This lack of interest in learning laments and viewing them as past underscores a broader trend I noticed where younger generations prioritize modern over historical ones. However, this sentiment also raises questions about the loss and the consequences of abandoning cultural traditions. This dichotomy between preserving the past and moving into the future is a common theme in societies undergoing rapid transformation. The challenge lies in finding the perfect way to balance how modernity will respect and integrate cultural heritage.

In today's Albania, this narrative highlights a familiar cultural dynamic in which traditional practices are often lost in the transition between generations, particularly as younger members move from smaller to larger cities for better educational and professional opportunities. This movement usually leads to gradual distancing from traditional cultural practices that are less relevant in the urban context.

> "Modernity is slowly killing every unique and valuable aspect of our country…Lamenting is now associated with villagers and backwardness." (Personal communication with Lele, Gjirokastër, 2022)

Andro Koçollari observed that the "media's portrayal of beauty standards and lifestyles increasingly mirrors Western ideals" (interview, 2019). This homogenized global culture is the process where "local culture are transformed or absorbed by a dominant outside culture" (Connor 2006; 391).

In terms of music, musical traditions often present a dynamic of moving both backward and forward simultaneously as they navigate the

tension between preservation and innovation. Ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger highlights this dual movement, noting that "musical traditions often seem to be moving in two directions at once - backward in time toward their roots and the future to growing tips of innovation" (Seeger 1993; 500). Building on Merchant's observation of a similar phenomenon in Uzbekistan's estrada genre, where there is a priority on making music as current as possible, utilizing cutting-edge dance rhythms and synthesized sounds but still connected to tradition, I seek to understand what is happening with the tradition of laments in today's Albania (Merchant 2015; 101).

During my fieldwork in Tirana, I engaged with many locals about their experiences with traditional laments. I got surprised when Aurela Gaçe, a name I had associated with pop music was connected to traditional music and laments. While checking her discography I discovered that Gaçe had made some interesting contributions to traditional music in her early career. In addition to her well-known pop songs, she has published and worked on several traditional pieces, including polyphonic songs, in a more modern and popularized style.[39]

One of the recordings that intrigued me was the song "Mu Thane Syte." This piece diverges from the traditional format of laments and is categorized as a polyphonic song. However, some songs are actually influenced by women's lament and have all characteristics of laments and are categorized as polyphonic songs. The lyrics and music of this song are

[39]Another singer that did a project to connect traditional music with rock and pop music was Ardit Gjebrea. For more on Project Jon see Nicholas Tochka (2024).

composed by the renowned rhapsode of Labëria, Feti Brahimi. Polyphonic groups, with female or male soloist have performed this song in the recent decades. However, the version performed by Aurela Gaçe has gained significant popularity, and it was the first example when my interlocuters wanted to show me an example of today's lament. Gaçe's rendition evokes the essence of women's laments while incorporating a modern twist. An excellent example of her lamentation some can find on YouTube is the song "Mu thane syte" (My Eyes Got Dry).[40]

The song integrates elements from polyphonic traditions and old laments, employing a four-voice performance structure like the popular southern Albanian polyphonic songs. It begins with a brief introductory melody performed in the kaval (end-blown flute). It adds digital effects such as echo and the sound of wind and waves." Aurela Gaçe is the "starter" in this particular song, delivering the initial melody. She is supported by other additional voices, enhancing the polyphonic texture of the piece. Gaçe uses wide vibrato and many melisma. The second voice follows in a similar way with wide vibrato and melisma that repeat and remind kaba with clarinet or violin. There are many repeated notes, an element like laments aiming to make the listeners pay attention and give importance to the lyrics. In between the strophes, there is an instrumental break and a dialogue between the clarinet and violin, which reminds us of the format of the saze (see more in

[40] This song is available on Spotify and YouTube. Today some can find multiple arrangement and performances from different folk artist of this song with most popular the performance of the popular traditional singer Nazif Cela and the artist Irini Qirjako. The performances I am analyzing can be found here: https://youtu.be/bRXQx_-4s8E?si=Lkuawrk63qV9rItU (accessed June 25th, 2024).

chapter 6). The use of these instruments not only adds to the sonic richness of the performance but also bridges the gap between vocal traditions and instrumental accompaniment, creating a more dynamic and varied auditory experience.

The song also incorporates modern influences through computer-generated sounds and digital production techniques. These contemporary elements are woven into the traditional framework. Reverb and echo are used to amplify the emotional intensity of the vocals and instruments. The sound of waves symbolizes the migration with boats of many Albanians towards Italy and the wind symbolizes the cold in the souls of the people who are left behind. This fusion of traditional and modern elements not only broadens the song's appeal to a wider audience but also exemplifies the innovative ways technology can be used to preserve and revive cultural heritage.

Lyrics

Mu thane syte, mu thane	My eyes got dry
O djali nenes, o djale	My son, oh, son
Mbase vjen kete behare	Maybe you come this summer
O djale i nenes, o djale	My son, oh, son
Je ne pune, a s'punon dot	Are you at work, or you cannot work
O djali i nenes, o djale	My son, oh, son
O se jam plake e nuk vij dot	Because I am old and cannot come (there)
O djali i nenes, o djale	My son, oh, son
Djale te paca shendoshe	Son, (I wish to have you) healthy
O djali i nenes, o djale	My son, oh, son

Historian Ronald Grigor Suny argues that the "stories people tell about themselves articulate national identity," a perspective particularly relevant to

analyzing lamentation practices in Albania (Suny 2001; 866). I am extending his notion of national identity to the stories and the music people listen to and perform. In exploring the modern perception of traditional lamenting practices among the younger generation, I examined social media platforms like YouTube and Reddit to better understand the broader public. Going through comments on lament videos on those platforms, it became clear that many young people misunderstand the purpose of laments. Instead of recognizing them as a means to alleviate the pain of separation, they perceive them as intensifying the sorrow experienced by grieving families. Additionally, some individuals consider lamenting an outdated tradition unsuitable for social media dissemination or global exposure.

However, laments performed by well-known artists such as Aurela Gaçe, blending tradition with modern influences, tend to receive positive attention and are welcomed and promoted. One of her YouTube videos for this song has gained over 600,000 views, more than 4,200 likes, and no dislikes. Additionally, all 179 comments were positive, praising her incredible performance and reflecting on the sad reality where mothers are left behind waiting for their sons.

In contrast, other videos of in-spot lamentation or if I can characterize them as raw lament material often face criticism and dismissal. On TikTok, a user uploaded a video of her grandmother lamenting the death of her husband and became viral in less than 24 hours. Among many comments, at least half criticized the grandmother for continuing these "old traditions,"

while others shamed the person who posted the video, arguing that such traditions should not be shared online as they portray Albanians as "backward." Due to the backlash, the video was taken down the day after it was uploaded by the creator. The reactions stem from a broader viewpoint that certain traditions are antiquated and should be set aside to promote other forms of art deemed more representative of a modern and more “national” identity.

“No young girl wants to learn the art of lamentation from their grandmother. (...) I feel bad about this because I am probably the last to know this art.” (personal communication with Lele, 2023). Laments hold profound cultural and emotional significance. They are not merely songs but expressions of collective sorrow and historical memory. The decline of lamentation practices in Albania is part of the larger narrative of cultural change, where new, globalized ones often replace traditional forms of expression, as seen in the example of Gaçe’s song and the reaction of social media users.

In summary, the tradition of laments in Albania faced significant challenges amidst the country's exposure to global influences and modernization efforts. As Albania integrated more with Western cultures, the younger generations became more attuned to contemporary global cultural expressions, moving away from traditional practices like lamentations.

Consequently, as Albania sought to project a modern national image, the practice of lamentations declined, with newer generations favoring a more modern life or as many people over conversation told me a more "Western" mindset.

Migration and Lamentation

Burrin e njeh kurbeti, gruan e njeh djepi (A man becomes a man abroad, a woman becomes a woman over a cradle) according to an Albanian proverb.[41] Migration in Albania presents a unique and complex phenomenon (Stecklov et al., 2010). Labor migration has a long history among Albanians, dating back to the Ottoman Empire when they dispersed across regions such as Sicily, Arbëresh, and southern Greece, Arvanites (Pistrick 2010; 51-53) and later in the early 20th century, Albanian immigration expanded to North America and Australia (Pistrick 2010; 51-53). Despite this history, post-socialist migration from Albania is unparalleled in Europe, resulting in a significant population loss. Between 1991 and 1993, approximately 200,000 Albanians fled the country searching for refuge and employment, primarily settling in Greece and Italy, Albania's wealthiest neighbors (King 2003; 284). Many Albanians moved from rural to urban centers, with Tirana region as the main

[41] Kurbett derives from the Turkish word gurbet, and refers to emigrate, to migrate from one place to another.

point for this internal migration. The percentage of in rural spaces and agricultural production reduced from 61% in 1989 to 50.5 % in 2001 in favor of the urban population (Sintès, 2019; 56). As people adjusted to new conditions and seized the shifting terrain of post-communist Albania, the internal migration contributed to shifts in population and cultural changes.

In the third decade of post-migration (2011–20), economic family factors and new influences, like children's education and limited prospects in Albania, led to significant changes in migration patterns. There was a decline in migration to Greece and Italy and an increase in highly educated Albanians moving to Germany, other Western European countries, and North America. This shift potentially boosted financial and social remittances and reduced Albania's human capital (Gëdeshi 2021; 5). As of 2024, Albania's net migration rate is -4.699 per 1000 population, reflecting a 4.02% decline from 2023, with the current population around 2.8 million, according to Worldometer.[42]

This societal transformation posed a particularly daunting scenario for the older generation, who often grappled with the departure of their children from their house, whether abroad or within Albania (King 2014; 731). Once individuals departed from their hometowns, reconnecting with their parents

[42] For more information check https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/albania-population/ (access May 20,2024).

back home became difficult. Numerous individuals never had the opportunity to reunite with their children again, while others expressed gratitude for sporadic visits.

During the conversations my sources shared a common thread in their life narratives—the absence of one or more children or grandchildren who had ventured outside Albania.[43] As they speak of their children and grandchildren scattered across foreign lands, the prevailing sentiment is not one of accomplishment but rather a sense of absence.

I define absence here in a similar way as "cultural, physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people's conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with" (Bille et al. 2010; 4). As commonly perceived, absence is synonymous with incompleteness, often giving rise to a profound sense of longing (Bille et al. 2010; 34). In the aftermath of a significant loss, individuals may experience a heightened awareness of the absence. The physical separation creates a sense of loss very similar to mourning and this theme was emphasized through the stories of many interlocutors.

[43] Naxhi Kasoruho's son was in Brazil, Lele's son was in Canada, Kico Kapetani's son is in Spain, Andro's granddaughter got married and left Gjirokastër, and S.K's daughter aspired to study in the US. Each time I returned to Gjirokastër and met with family and friends, I observed a growing trend: young people frequently expressed their plans to leave Albania.

During my conversations, women used very frequently the expression *me lane si qyqe/ jemi vetem si qyqe* (left alone like a cuckoo/we are alone like cuckoo). The cuckoo holds rich and complex symbolism in Albanian songs and folklore. It is often seen as a symbol of loneliness, migration, and sorrow, embodying themes of sadness and loss. The cuckoo's mournful call is used metaphorically in songs to express the deep feelings of people who have experienced loss or have been separated from their homeland. Additionally, the cuckoo symbolizes mourning and the deep sorrow of losing loved ones, particularly in lamentation songs. They vividly described how her once lively home became silent after her children left. This metaphor of being left alone like a cuckoo encapsulates the isolation experienced by those who remain behind in Albania.

> When you are left alone, shuffling back and forth through rooms that used to echo with laughter and chatter, a lone cuckoo, singing a solo song in an empty house, things change…" (Interview with Lele, Gjirokastër, 2022).

The quote from Lele encapsulates a profound moment of solitude and nostalgia, reflecting on the transformation of her once-bustling home into a silent, empty space. The metaphor of the "lone cuckoo" singing a solo song vividly illustrates her sense of isolation and the stark contrast between the past and the present. This image highlights the absence of these very elements in her life, underlining the persistent silence and emptiness that now pervade her home. Lele's narrative is universal, resonating deeply with

people who experience the emotional void that accompanies children leaving home.

This emotional void, profoundly illustrated in that narrative, aligns with the cultural context of Albania, where the act of expression, interpretation, and contextualization traditionally falls within the female sphere (Sugarman 1997). Men crossing into the emotional realm of women is disapproved of, especially in public, as it is crossing gender boundaries (Pistrick 2015; 65). Women such as Lele, Andro, and Rita shared that the profound losses they experienced have shaped their lives. It is important to emphasize that although all these women have experienced similar painful experiences, Lele is a lamenter, and even today, lamentation plays an important role in her daily routine.

> "The shared sorrow of mothers losing their children resonated deeply with my personal experience. Today, I might lament for a young boy in the neighboring village, and tomorrow, I might find myself mourning my own child." (interview with Lele, Gjirokastër 2022).

Lele's quotation captures the intense emotional upheaval and profound sense of loss she experiences. Observing reflections of her loss in the eyes of a widow exposes a shared loss among women, thus strengthening solidarity and emphasizing the universality of parental loss. This connection between lamenting the deceased and someone alive but far away aligns with Caraveli's (1986) observation that "widowhood and emigration are described in Greek folk tradition as metaphorical extensions of death." This cultural

framework highlights the profound impact of separations by using death as a metaphor. Similarly, Seremetakis (1991) notes that migration acts as a "basic cognitive structure within which life and death are thought," emphasizing how cultural traditions shape the understanding of physical and emotional separations. These academic perspectives complement Lele's story by showing how personal loss is expressed and understood within a broader cultural context.

Lele presents a viewpoint on the evolution of lamenting in connection with human experiences, moving from grief for deceased people to grief for migrants. Initially, she lamented the loss of her husband, however the focus of her lamentation broadened to include the theme of migration because many families around started losing their children to migration. The following example is a lament from her after her husband passed.

Lyrics: Lele's Lament when her husband passed away.

Cte te them o Zoti tone	*What can I say, my God*
Ti rite 10 femije	You grew 10 children
Rritur e rritur me gjeme	Grew them, and grew them with troubles
Gjysem qene pa meme (gjysmat me gruan e pare)	Half of them were without mother (half of the children the husband had them with the first wife)
Sa te urte e kishe lene	How kind you left her
Ti e kishe ate t'eme	You had your mother

Lele composed these lyrics to show me how her laments have changed today after her husband's passing and after missing her children that migrated away from her village (see Figure 22).

Lele's Lament when children migrated from the village

Cmu thane syte cmu thane	*My eyes got dry*
O djali i nenes oh	*My son, oh, son*
Te pres vite me rradhe	*I am waiting for many years*
O djali i nenes, djale	*My son, oh, son*
U nis djali per ne kurbet	*You started for the kurbet*
Biro o djale	*Son, my boy*
Sa shume malli me ka marre	*I am longing for you*
Biro, o djale	*Son, my boy*

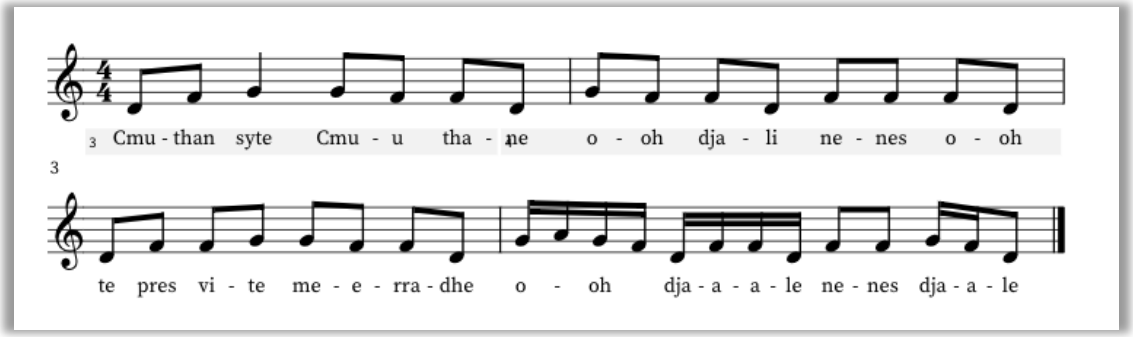


Figure 22: Lament from Lele. Transcription by the author.

Lele did not perform this in her usual voice but rather as an example to illustrate the difference between the lyrics she performed before and after her children migrated. She explained that she cannot perform the lament in the same way as she does during a funeral or when she is in her home. Lele felt it was inappropriate, as replicating the emotional intensity might bring bad luck. The phrases are short (two measures) and based on a pentatonic

structure, primarily using the interval of a fourth. The second verse closely resembles the first but is more articulated and includes additional ornaments. The text is syllabic, and the melody is simple, featuring a descending movement to the main note from a fourth or fifth above the pitch center. Lele's changes in repertoire underscore the profound impact her children's migration has had on her emotional expression.

In terms of lyrics, the first strophe presents the long period that the mother has not seen her son. Her eyes have run dry, signifying the depth of her sorrow for not seeing her child. This simple, yet powerful phrase "Oh son" conveys a range of different emotions: an intense longing, deep sorrow, and a desperate plea for reconnection. It serves as a constant reminder of the impact of migration, illustrating not only the physical separation but also the emotional and psychological toll on familial relationships. This expression underscores the mother's hope for her son's return, reflecting an experience among many families affected by migration. The repetition and ornamentation in the melody further emphasize the emotional weight of her lament, enhancing the listener's understanding of the profound grief and hope that defines her existence.

Another lament I recorded in Gjirokastër is the following lament. The mother lost her 25-year-old son 2 years ago and still laments him every Sunday in the graveyard.

The melody of this lament is typical of southern Albania and is rooted in the region's traditional pentatonic scale. The structure of the lament is made up of phrases lasting four measures, with each phrase almost identically repeated as the grieving mother expresses her sorrow through verse. A distinctive element of this lament is the use of the words "oh son" at the end of each phrase, which are then alternated with "oh boy" in subsequent verses. This variation adds a layer of emotional depth to the performance, reflecting the mother's deep grief without relying on monotonous repetition. The mother's choice of words and the melody combine to convey not only her pain but also the cultural significance of the relationship between parents and their children in this region (see Figure 23).

Lyrics

Ti u trete ne shtepi	You dissolved into your home
O bir, O djale,	Oh son, oh boy,
U bon 2 vjet qe mbylle syte	It's been 2 years since you closed your eyes
Per ke na I le porosite	For whom did you leave your messages?
Do veje 25 vjec	You would have turned 25,
Po punoje ne kurbet	You worked abroad,
Atje mbylle syte	It was there you closed your eyes.

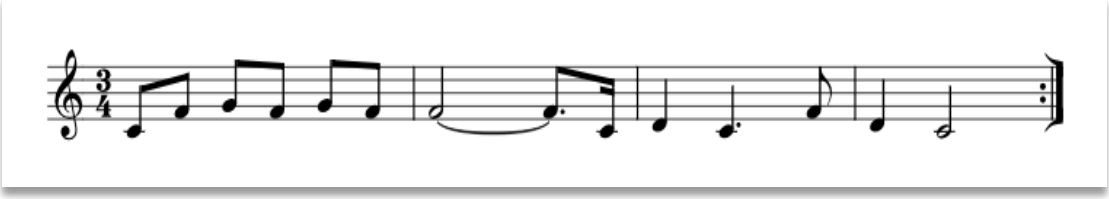


Figure 23: Lament recorded in Gjirokastër. Transcription by the author.

The evolving nature of migration has impacted the traditional transmission of lamentation arts, particularly among women lamenters. As their children leave the country, there is a noticeable decline in the transmission of laments from generation to generation. In addition, the traditional repertoire of laments has transformed in response to those changes. Migration songs have become a means of creative expression as migration affects the families; they go beyond conventional sorrow and offer a modern outlet for the emotional complexity of migration experiences.[44]

In conclusion, the evolving nature of migration has impacted the traditional transmission of lamentation arts, particularly among women lamenters. As their children leave the country, there is a noticeable decline in the transmission of laments from generation to generation. In addition, the traditional repertoire of laments has transformed in response to those changes.

Laments after COVID-19 Pandemic

It was March 2020 when the world began to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, the lively, fast-paced life came to a stop, and a sense of

[44] See Pistrick 2016 for more on migration songs in south Albania.

uncertainty hit every country. Nations grappled with widespread virus, overwhelmed healthcare systems, and severe economic consequences. Governments implemented lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing measures to stop the spread. The pandemic severely affected public health and set off major economic consequences as business closed, unemployment rise, and financial markets became unstable (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2020). From religious practices to family gatherings and public celebrations, many cherished traditions were either significantly altered or put on hold.[45]

Pandemic restricted and postponed my planned fieldwork for almost two years. Travel bans and government lockdowns made it impossible to reach Albania. Restrictions on public gatherings suspended my meetings and interviews (see Introduction). This section analyzes my participation in funerals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and my experiences in Albania after the pandemic. Direct observations gave me insights into how communities navigated the challenges posed by COVID-19 restrictions,

[45] The Council of Ministers announced the state of natural disaster in the entire territory of the Republic of Albania with Decision no. 243, dated 24.3.2020 "On the declaration of the state of natural disaster", for a period of 30 days from the moment of entry into force. On 23.4.2020, the Assembly of the Republic of Albania through decision no. 18/2020 "On granting consent for the extension of the state of natural disaster", decided to extend until 23.06.2020 the state of natural disaster. For more information about impact and government impact see this website: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/933637d0-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/933637d0-en#:~:text=The%20prime%20minister%20declared%20a,for%20dealing%20with%20the%20outbreak. (accessed Feb.2024)

altered funeral rituals, and coping with loss during these unprecedented times, and how all those changes affected the practice of laments.

In June 2023 I attended the one-year memorial of a family friend in Tirana, who passed from COVID-19 at the age of 58. The memorial was held in the deceased's house. From the moment I entered the house, I understood that the inability to engage in the traditional mourning practices due to pandemic restrictions had affected significantly the grieving processes.[46] Marika, the mother of the deceased, explained to me:

> "I was not able to say goodbye properly to my son. My lifelong friends could not come, and my other son from Canada could not travel. It was only me and his heartbroken wife, and neither I nor his wife properly said goodbye to him. I did not grieve him." (interview with Marika, Tirana 2023)

Marika's quote encapsulates a multifaceted grief deriving from the inability to say a proper goodbye to her son. This isolated mourning shared only with her son's wife, highlights a limited support system during a critical and tragic time, amplifying their emotional burden and showing a lack of closure. Marika's experience illustrates a broader trend observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, where government directives to avoid travel, gatherings, and physical contact created social and psychological distances at funerals and memorials (Kondo Arita, 2023).

[46] I the Appendix I am providing table with the steps from the mourning practices that people used to follow in the recent post-socialist years. I also provide a new table of the steps that they had to do in order to comply with new COVID-regulations.

She noted, “We did not have people over to our home,” reflecting a departure from communal support and a shift towards more privatized mourning rituals (Carter et al., 2022). This transition is confirmed by existing literature, which discusses how contemporary society increasingly manages grief within private rather than communal spheres (Giddens, 1992; Wilce, 2016; Kondo-Arita and Becker, 2023). Marika's admission that she "did not grieve him" suggests unresolved grief leading to prolonged emotional distress (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

This narrative underscores the broader societal impact of disrupted mourning rituals, leading to “complicated grief,” a phenomenon examined extensively in the past. The model provides a framework for understanding complicated forms of grief, such as ‘‘chronic,’’ ‘‘absent,’’ or ‘‘inhibited’’ grief (Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1996; Parkes & Weiss, 1983) as we have come to know them. The inability to say goodbye in a meaningful and traditional manner, compounded by the absence of close family members and friends due to travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic, left Marika and other people who had to go through loss during the pandemic with a sense of unresolved grief.

The pandemic has accelerated this trend toward individuality, and shorter duration funeral settings as evidenced by the increased utilization of funeral home services in Tirana. In the last four years, at least 54 new funeral

homes were built in Tirana, with other funeral homes opening in smaller cities such as Durrës, Korça, Saranda, Fier, and other locations.[47] Four years after the pandemic and despite easing restrictions, traditional home-based mourning rituals have not resumed as expected. The ingrained habits formed during the pandemic and the convenience provided by professional funeral services drive this shift. Nertila (age 47) exemplified this shift when she remembered her mother-in-law death:

> "I felt relieved that I didn't have to invite the entire neighborhood to my house. I simply couldn't engage in the rituals my mother would have undertaken during her time. I work full time. I am tired. I don't think this is making me a bad person who pays no respect. I think I am doing what is best for me and not what society says I must do" (interview with Nertila, Gjirokastër, 2024).

Nertila's quote offers a nuanced perspective on modern grief practices and the evolving nature of funerals. It provides insight into personal choices, as well as the balance between traditional and contemporary approaches to dealing with loss. Nertila expresses relief for not having to host at her place the entire neighborhood and this highlights a shift towards a more private mourning. Managing the house, raising children, and juggling jobs leave little time and energy for thorough routines. People began to give personal well-being priority over societal norms and expectations.

[47] Finding the new funeral homes it was a difficult task in Tirana. I used this website in order to keep track of new additional agencies: https://www.njoftime.al/agjensi-funerale/l-al-c-42.html?&idk=42&page=1

The statement, "I don't think this makes me a bad person who pays no respect," surprised me. To me it showed a tension between personal needs and society expectations. It also heightened an element of individualism that is a modern concept that goes against the communal approach common in the communist Balkans and in smaller towns where people depend on each other more. My older interlocutors would consider it shameful if people did not show up to or were not invited to funerals, but the younger generation enjoys having fewer responsibilities and taking care of themselves first. Attendance at funerals it still a social duty, but as Moufarrej also observes "...the time of the funeral ceremony and the receiving of condolences are now planned around people's work schedules (2024; 91).

Private grief intersects with modern life, where demanding work schedules and familial responsibilities make traditional rituals impractical. Over the past two decades, there has been a transition from open public funerals to private family funerals, and ultimately to "direct funerals with neither wakes nor religious rituals" (Kondo-Arita 2023; 4). This change reflects the idea that rituals are becoming considered as more important for the grieving family than as for the deceased (Shintani; 2009). Professional funeral services now handle the logistical aspects of mourning, easing the emotional and organizational burden on grieving families. Funeral services today manage the practical side providing help to the bereaved families in the

aspect of administrative load. This worldwide trend of private grief emphasizes the need of changing old customs to meet modern living or a more "modern culture of mourning"(Winkel 2001; 65).

The pandemic has facilitated the rise of digital mourning practices, such as virtual memorials and online obituaries. These platforms allow for controlled, curated expressions of grief, signifying a new mode of mourning that blends public and private spheres (Walter; 2015). While these digital spaces offer an appearance of communal support, they often lack the depth of face-to-face interactions traditionally associated with mourning. When I had to attend the funeral of my grandmother online, the experience felt incredibly empty. I was constantly aware of the distance separating me from her. There were no hugs, no shared tears, or collective mourning. I felt that I did not pay my respect to her and did not find the closure I needed to let her go.

Cultural elements affecting how sorrow is handled and expressed add to the challenge of closure. Although many cultures worldwide offer psycho-social care and welfare help to those experiencing loss, societal stigmas might cause the underuse of these resources.[48] Even today in Albania, the fear of stigma leads many bereaved to resist any psychological or social support

[48] Studies in Germany and Australia (Van den Berg et al., 2011; McCarthy, 2016) show productivity decreases because of unresolved grief, British bereaved visited medical institutions more than other people in the same generation (Prigerson et al. (2000). In the USA and Japan grievers spent 2.7 times more on medical and pharmaceutical services (see (Becker, et al., 2021)

(Hyseni Duraku, et al.2023; 7). The lack of communal grieving rituals, combined with the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, can leave individuals struggling to cope with their loss and pain. As a result, the grieving process becomes more challenging, highlighting the need for greater acceptance and support for mental health care in addressing grief (ibid. 2023; 2).

Although I never heard anyone discuss psychological or social support during any of the funerals I attended in Albania, the experience was markedly different at the Albanian funeral I attended in Connecticut (August 2024).[49] In Connecticut, I saw a clear separation between people who considered medication such as anti-anxiety drugs or antidepressants as a "suppressant of the grief" and others who saw the use of those drugs as a pragmatic response to the demands of a fast-paced and individualized society, was full on display.[50] After taking Xanax, the mother of the deceased

[49] This Albanian funeral in Connecticut, for a family that had relocated nearly twelve years ago, drew over 350 attendees, all Albanians who had lived in the United States for decades. This gathering underscored the strong cultural bonds and solidarity among Albanian immigrants, highlighting their commitment to traditional mourning practices despite being far from their homeland. Attendees expressed their grief openly, reflecting the communal nature of Albanian mourning customs.

[50] The evolving trend of pharmaceutical interventions in coping with grief, exemplified using pills like Xanax, underscores a profound transformation in how individuals navigate and express their emotions in the face of loss. While this dissertation doesn't extensively delve into this topic, it recognizes the importance of understanding the impact of such interventions.

could not cry and say frequently "I cannot cry for my kid. I cannot feel my pain and I want to cry for him."

This mother felt "robbed" of the natural grieving process because of medication. The inability to cry and express feelings signifies a profound disconnection from her emotions, which are essential for processing and healing from such a significant loss. Living in Albania for half of her life, she told me that she understood the importance of crying as a natural and cathartic response to grief, and without this outlet, she feels unable to honor her child's memory fully. However, other family member called the expression of grief loudly "sheer foolishness." She continued saying:

> "If I didn't have my prescribed pills, I would not have been sane, especially after COVID-19. Properly prescribed medications are not harmful; they provide assistance. In such moments, people should not be left in pain, but many Albanians still do not understand. They still do not care about their mental health. They still do not believe in depression." (interview with *Ela, Connecticut, August 2024).

*Ela's statement underscores the crucial role of prescribed medications in managing mental health, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their impact on maintaining mental stability during crises. However, she also identifies a cultural taboo within the Albanian community regarding mental health awareness and acceptance. The stigma surrounding mental illness has been considered a particularly critical problem among Albanians (Dow, H. et. al. 2011; 95). While some young individuals are more open to embracing innovative methods of coping with

loss, the older generation struggles to establish a profound connection with the deceased without the familiar traditions of lamentation and traditional funeral rituals that have shaped their experiences. For many in the older demographic, they are experiencing the cathartic release of emotions, often facilitated by the unfiltered and personal grieving process.

In summary, it is evident that COVID-19 has accelerated existing trends towards smaller, private, or "direct" funerals and reduced family attention to large gatherings. What remains to be determined is whether this shift represents a welcome relief from traditional responsibilities or if it leaves a burden of unaddressed psychosocial symptoms that may later manifest in different forms of health issues.

Conclusion

The decline of traditional lamentation practices in post-socialist Albania presents the broader cultural evolution influenced by modernization and Westernization. After the transition to a modern country, lamentation, once a powerful expression of grief started to fade. As modernity and globalization began to attract younger generation, traditional practices become incompatible with the new modern identity they adapted.

Today, older generations lament the loss of this tradition. In their eyes, they see the decline as weakening the communal bonds and the emotional authenticity they provided. Younger Albanians, on the other hand, see laments as past antiques. This generational divide highlights a broader transformation in Albania, where the push towards modernization often comes at the expense of traditional practices.

Migration has complicated the transmission and survival of lament tradition. Mass migration led to significant demographic shifts leaving villages empty and elder parents longing for their children. This sense of absence and longing coupled with loneliness in an empty village, has transformed the nature of laments. Today these laments incorporate lyrics and stories of migration.

In the last four years, COVID-19 pandemic has altered the ways communities express and experience grief. The restrictions on the number of attendees and travel bans have led to a rise in privatized and professionalized funeral services. The pandemic also accelerated the adoption of digital mourning practices, further transforming the cultural landscape of grief and lamentation.

Four generations ago, Albanians relied heavily on community support to prepare for funeral rituals, emphasizing the importance of collective involvement in mourning practices. Two generations ago, the

communist regime disrupted these traditions, severing family ties and isolating political enemies from both social life and rituals. Today, the separation of work and private life has been praised as a hallmark of individualism, therefore, bereaved individuals aim for more abbreviated and privatized funeral to maximize their well-being and manage a fast-paced life.

In conclusion, the tradition of lamentation in Albania is an example of how cultural practices are continually reshaped by socioeconomic and political forces. The decline of these traditions is a loss and an evolution that reflects the complexities of cultural change in the modern world. Thoughtful preservation efforts can ensure that these rich traditions are not lost but continue to evolve, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural identity in an ever-changing global context. By doing so, Albanian society can honor its past while embracing the future, ensuring that lamentation's profound expressions of grief and communal solidarity remain vital to its cultural heritage.

Chapter Six
Lament Beyond Funerals

June 2023, Gjirokastër.

While walking around my neighborhood, a voice calling "*ej vajze*" (hey girl) made me stop and turn around. Intrigued, I faced a quartet of four ladies in black attire who invited me to get closer to them with a fast gesture. I greeted them politely, and they asked me, "Whose daughter are you?" As soon as I told them my name, their attitude changed from a curiosity to a welcoming and friendly occurrence. As the four knew my grandmother, they asked me about her health. I told them that my grandmother had been grappling with a long period of illness, and for this reason, she is not taking walks outside any longer. They expressed sadness and immediately asked me if I was married. In three weeks, I replied. They congratulated me, and one of the ladies told me, "Your grandmother has been grieving for years. She will most definitely perform a song at your wedding." I thanked them for the good wishes and left wondering what kind of songs my grandmother, a person who had not celebrated for almost forty years, would decide to sing at her first granddaughter's wedding.

This chapter draws on autoethnography, reflecting my dual role as both an "outsider" and a "native" performer, having performed alongside those musicians several times in the past decade. Similar to Ali Jihad Racy

(2003; 8), I often found myself having to shift multiple times between my positions and roles as a "musician" and "researcher," especially when conducting fieldwork on instrumental laments. My musician friends found that I would perform traditional and not Western classical music exciting, and they would often get surprised by some of my questions that they thought I already knew.

As my fieldwork coincided with the preparations for my own wedding, many of my interlocuters found it appropriate to share traditions and memories from their own experiences growing up in Gjirokastër. Although initially, I did not consider exploring other forms of lamentations beyond funerary laments, after spending a whole summer performing in *panegyria* (festivals), preparing for my wedding, and attending other celebrations, I realized the importance of including this chapter in this dissertation. Feelings of separation, loss, and grief are often embedded within moments of joy, such as weddings; the new chapter can evoke both excitement and sorrow.

This chapter explores the different manifestations of lamentation, aiming to bridge the gap between personal narrative and academic inquiry. I divide this chapter into two main sections, each looking at a different aspect of musical lamentation. The first section examines wedding laments - a form of lamentation beyond funerals. Following a quick historical overview, I focus

on the musical analysis of wedding laments and conclude with a discussion on the evolution and the decline of this practice.

The second part investigates the instrumental lament, commonly known as kaba, performed by the traditional ensembles. I highlight the close connection between this form of mourning and women's laments. Participating in festivities offered me an understanding of how musicians effortlessly incorporated vocal cues from women's laments within their performances. Examining music and transcriptions, I demonstrate the complex connection between these forms of celebratory music and women's funerary laments.

Wedding Laments

"*Goja qan, goja kendon.*" (the mouth cries, the mouth sings) says a popular expression in Albania. Drawing on my discussion with the four women I met in Gjirokastër, I started thinking about using the verb "cry" in Albania. The Albanian language employs a single verb, qaj, (cry), to encapsulate a spectrum of meanings associated with the act of crying. In discussions with ethnomusicologist Bledar Kondi, we discussed four distinct connotations, each contributing to the different nature of emotional expression in Albanian discourse. The first one is to sob or shed tears, the second is to cry or lament, the third is to complain or whine, and the fourth is to do something perfectly

(video interview with Bledar Kondi, 2023). Sobbing and lamenting are frequently associated with emotions of loss and grief and gestures expressing pain and sorrow (Stroebe et al. 2008; 4-5).

Figure 24: Women in black. Photo taken by the author. Gjirokastër 2023.

Ever since the four women from the neighborhood (see Figure 24) expressed their belief that my grandmother, who had not been actively involved in both her sons' weddings, would play a significant role in mine, a question has continued to linger in my thoughts. Why would my grandmother, who had withdrawn from the festivities, choose to participate more actively in my wedding? What did the women mean when they said she would sing a song?

"There is no wedding without crying and no funeral without laughter," told my mother once we finished trying the wedding dress in Tirana.

> "During my time, the wedding festivities began on a Thursday with the bride wearing her white wedding dress. Think something like the today's bridal shower. The groom was not allowed to visit the bride that day. On Friday neighbors and family friends arrive. On Saturday was the main celebration of the bride. This celebration would occur in a nice restaurant, often with live music groups. The groom and the in-laws would join briefly at midnight. On Sunday, the groom would pick up the bride in the afternoon, marking the farewell moment as family and friends offered their blessings, and women would sing the last farewell songs. After stopping at their new house, they would celebrate later in a restaurant with the bride's family joining again after midnight." (interview with Marjeta, Tirana, 2023).[51]

I wanted to learn more about the farewell songs women traditionally perform at weddings. Are these songs the same songs the four women suggested my grandmother might sing at my wedding? Given that we are discussing a different form of "farewell," could some of these songs be considered laments? Research focusing specifically on wedding laments reveals striking parallels with funerary laments from diverse global contexts (see McLaren 2008; Watson and Johnson 2003; Köchümkulova 2008; Wilce 2016, etc.)

Those who perform laments perceive them as emotionally essential and "a bridge between the living and the dead," with "dead" encompassing

[51] For a more analytical timeline of the wedding ritual see Appendix. The description of such weddings was during approx. 1960-1990.

both literal and metaphorical meanings (Charaveli-Chaves 1980; 141). Mourning is commonly associated with emotions of loss and grief, but it serves a unique role in the context of bridal laments. These laments often reflect the bride's sorrow at leaving her parental home and the community's collective acknowledgment of this significant life transition (Mazo 1990; 99). Bridal laments mark the transition from the bride's familiar world to a new unfamiliar world. As she embraces her new role, taking on the responsibility of her family's well-being and preparing to bear healthy children for her husband, her carefree days are gone (Comaroff 1980; 242).

The bride's departure through marriage is often compared to death, representing an irreversible break from her family. Those bridal laments are filled with imagery of death, darkness, and separation (Blake 1978; 19-20). Both lamentation forms (funerary and wedding laments) allow individuals to openly express complex emotions, allowing them to grieve, reminisce, and release their feelings. Laments allow the bride to vocalize her personal sorrow while also involving the community in her transition (McLaren 2020; 68-70).

Eleni Prifti, a 72-year-old from Gjirokastër who married at the age of sixteen, recounted her mother's lyrics before she left the house: "*Ike nga babai ike, kur te vish do vish si mike*" (You left from your father, you left; when you come back, you will come as a guest) (Personal communication, 2018). These humorous lyrics showcase this separation between the bride and her family.

Her family

Syzeza qan me lot	The black-eyed (girl) cries with tears
Se ka babanë e s'e le dot	Because she has her father and cannot leave him

Husband's family

Merre dhe babanë nga mbrara	Take your father along,
ta vemë çoban me pata	we'll make him a shepherd for the ducks

These lyrics capture a cultural change in which a married daughter shifts her loyalty from her birth family to her new family. Eleni revealed that the most challenging aspect of her marriage was the emotional struggle of leaving her family despite living only five minutes away from her parents' house. Although she visited her parents daily, her husband was from the same neighborhood, and the knowledge that she would no longer feel like part of the family tormented her.

Whether remembering their own weddings or those of friends, all my female interviewees shared a similar experience: once the bride leaves the house her family will lament her fate. In earlier times, both families typically arranged marriages, with sons and daughters having little say in their unions. This often led to challenging relationships, particularly from the bride's perspective."The only thing I prayed when my wedding date was set was to have a good husband with no alcohol or gambling issues," said one H. K interlocutor. It was very important for those women to end up in a good,

arranged marriage because in case they endured mistreatment, these women could not speak out against their families to maintain the family name and honor.

The fear of an uncertain fate and the stories shared by other girls and women are components of wedding laments. Interestingly, when the bride or another woman began lamenting, girls from both the bride's and groom's sides would respond with positive or humorous lyrics to reassure the new bride and make her feel more comfortable. Simultaneously, the groom's family would attempt to reassure the new bride, emphasizing her good fortune in joining their family. Some lyrics Andro recited for me are the following:

Dolle nuse dolle	You came out bride
Nga ato kasolle	From those shacks
Hyre nuse hyre	You entered as a bride
Në keto sehire	In those palaces

The technique of employing contrasting lyrics is used to help the bride adjust and reduce her fears. Both families want to give a supportive atmosphere and emphasize her good luck and acceptance into her new family. However, the estrangement women felt from their birth families after marriage can be compared only to the concept of death. Once crossed, it marks that can never be reversed or reunited (Johnson 2003; 33). “One time I fought with my husband. I cried a lot, and I went to my parents. My father

told me to stop crying and go back to my husband because I didn't have a place at his home. (personal conversation with L.R, 2018).

The phrase "I did not have a place at his home" may sound harsh to me and others, but it was a common sentiment for many people. The bridal laments sang during the last farewell with the bride's family "mark the stages of separation from their natal homes" (Johnson 2003; 33). Like a soul departing in death, the bride leaves behind the familiar world to enter an unfamiliar and new realm, where her former life becomes inaccessible (Weiss 2019; 32). Today, many Albanian couples choose to live together for several years before marriage and separate from their parents, which reduces the sense of separation traditionally felt by brides. These changes have also affected the way wedding rituals are performed.

From the several weddings I observed during my fieldwork, only one resembled a more traditional southern Albania wedding.[52] The other weddings mirrored a more westernized/American wedding, featuring a maid of honor, bridesmaids, the exchange of vows, and celebrations that lasted into the early morning hours. Preparing for my own wedding while also conducting fieldwork, I could not stop thinking that my wedding would also be very different from the traditional ceremonies my family was

[52] Traditional characteristics of this wedding were: 1. The groom and his family went on Sunday to pick up the bride from her family and went on a honeymoon and 2. They had two different weddings: one for the bride and her family and guests and one for the groom and his guests.

performing years ago.[53]

One day after the wedding I decided to wear my wedding dress and visit my grandmother's home.[54] She wanted to invite some of her friends as well so at least she could celebrate my wedding with her good friends. As soon as I entered my grandmother said "Thoma, come and see your granddaughter; she is getting married. She came to greet us." The other women stopped her saying that "This is a celebration not to start crying and lamenting again. Let us start today with a song instead" Beka, 63 years old woman said to us, and she started singing this song (see Figure 25).

Lyrics

Sa bukur na ka dal nusja,	How beautiful is our bride
mashalla, mashalla[55]	mashallah, mashallah
E bukur per bukuri,	Beautiful so beutiful
mashalla, mashalla	mashallah, mashallah
Paska shtatin si sevlie,	It has the hair like silk,
mashalla, mashalla	mashallah, mashallah
Paska ballin o perishan	It has the forehead, oh, a paradise,
mashalla, mashalla	mashallah, mashallah

[53] See appendix for the rituals how they have changed through time.

[54] My grandmother did not join us for the ceremony and the dinner, despite numerous requests from family members. She made the tough decision to stay away from the festivities due to her ongoing pain. Her choice was driven by a desire to ensure that people could celebrate without feeling obligated to look after her, but I suspect that the real reason was her reluctance to show the extent of her deteriorating health and her pride in not wanting others to witness her inability to walk or stand by herself.

[55] "Mashallah" (ما شاء الله) is an Arabic expression that translates to "what God has willed" or "as God has willed." It is often used to express appreciation, joy, praise, or thankfulness for something or someone, acknowledging that the beauty, success, or good fortune observed is by the will of God. It is also used to ward off the evil eye and to prevent envy. In the context of the song lyrics, "mashallah" is used repeatedly to admire and praise the bride's beauty.

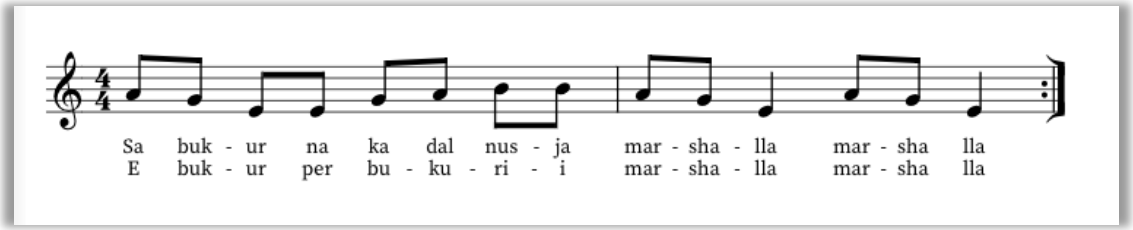


Figure 25: Transcription of Wedding Song. Transcription by the author.

During my fieldwork I noticed that many families commonly sing this song when the groom's family arrives to take the bride. This moment is very emotional as the bride's family comes together and guests gather to bid their farewells. Women perform this song in a fast tempo while clapping on every syllable. The lyrics serve as a tribute to the bride's beauty. They celebrate her beauty as she prepares to start her new life. The role of those songs is to transform young girls into married women and to transform their emotions going from one home to another (Watson 1996).

It was not until I stood up to leave that this was the moment that they felt my departure. I asked my grandmother to tell me anything that her soul felt right to tell me at that moment. She told Beka to ask the rest of the women to help her, and they started their farewell lament (see Figure 26)

Lyrics

Kur u rrite moj flori	When you grew up, my dear,
U bëre nuse për shtëpi	You became a bride for a home
Për shtepinë e burrit tënd	For your husband's home
Lum atyre ci I ka rënë	Blessed are those who have you

Gjyshi goca donte shume	Grandfather loved girls dearly
Po s'gezoje dot as goc as cun	But he did not enjoy a girl nor a boy
Po do ja them une sa te shkoj	But I'll tell him as soon as I go
Se me s'dua te jetoj	Because I longer don't want to live
Mall e vrer kjo jetë e tërë	Longing and bitterness, this entire life
Mall per ata qe nuk jetojnë më	Longing for those who are no longer alive
Mall dhe per ju qe keni ik	Longing for you that you are away
Larg shumë larg ne Amerikë	Very Far in the Far America

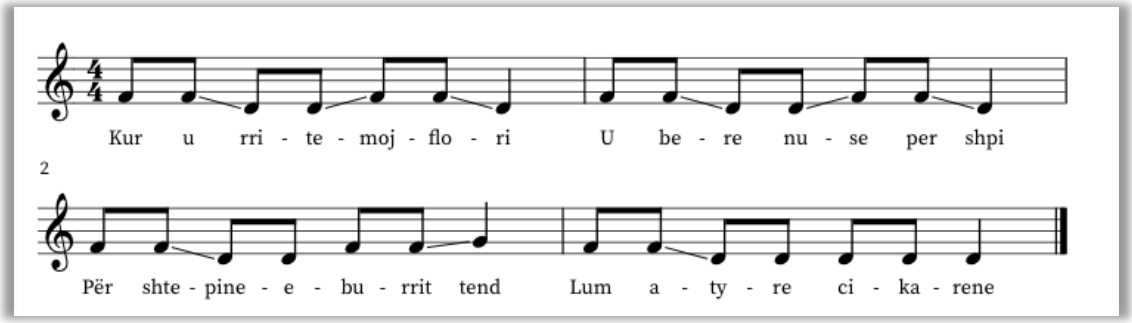


Figure 26: Wedding lament before the bride leaves the house. Transcription by the author.

They repeated this lament three times. My grandmother's friend sat quietly next to her, offering silent support. They could understand that in such a moment, their words are not helpful. She lamented in a low voice, almost whispering the lyrics. It felt as if she was sharing a secret with me. What struck me most was her recurrent use of the term "mall," which unmistakably conveyed her deep longing for her husband.

"While *dhimbje* (pain) is usually connected with the terms of death, *mall* (longing/nostalgia), possesses a less emotionally intense quality, embodying a yearning for something temporarily absent, with the possibility of its return" (Pistrick 2016; 74). This lament reflects on love, loss, and longing. It relates to the emotional suffering of separation as loved ones move far away. It highlights significant life transitions, such as growing up and becoming a bride, and the deep sense of loss felt by family members left behind. The next bridal lament was performed in the city of Saranda. The moment the bride would leave the house the women inside the house started lamenting her departure. Her grandmother was the first to say goodbye to her therefore the lyrics started like this:

Lyrics

Se ci theve krahët moj,	You broke her wings, oh bride,
Kraht e moj gjyshes jote,	Your grandmother's wings,
qaje ti moj nuse, qaje ditën sotme	Cry now, oh bride, cry today
Gjyshja të shikon ti nuse,	Grandma watches you, oh bride,
Mbyshi syte me lot,	Fill your eyes with tears,
qaje ti moj nuse, qaje ditë sotme	Cry now, oh bride, cry today.
Paska llafe per të të thenë moj	She has words to tell you, oh bride,
Por sta thoka dot	But she cannot speak them,
qaje ti moj nuse, qaje ditën sotme	Cry now, oh bride, cry today.
Baba të shikon ti moj nuse,	Your father watches you, oh bride,
Mbushi syte me lot,	Fill your eyes with tears,
Qaje ti moj nuse, qaje diten sotme	Cry now, oh bride, cry today.

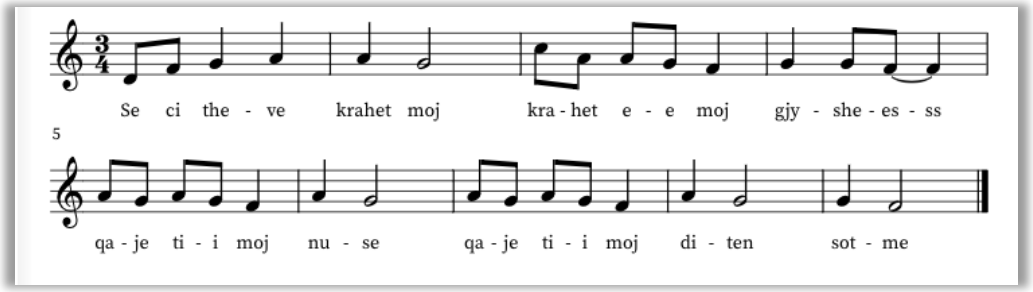


Figure 27: Wedding lament. Recorded and transcribed by the author.

In this lament, some women would keep the iso, while others joined the main soloist on the last phrase and created intervals of thirds (see Figure 27). The women would stay still while lamenting, with some wiping their tears. The melodies are often drowned out by sighing and frequent voice breaks, not just at the beginning and ends of phrases but throughout the entire lament. The declining melodic arc is straightforward, accompanied by embellishments that work as an ornament for the long notes. Although the music stays relatively constant, some distinct elements of improvisation are woven into the performance.

Exploring wedding laments reveals that, although having different contexts, funeral and wedding laments share great similarities. In both cases, the role of laments is to serve as an expression of grief, separation, and loss. Although my interlocutors referred to these as songs rather than laments, I conclude they do belong in the genre of laments as they share a similar purpose and are intrinsically linked.

Additionally, these laments highlight the paradoxical nature of life, where even the happiest celebrations- such as weddings – may include moments of sorrow. Moments of fun and happy memories can emerge during grief, usually resulting from feelings such as longing and nostalgia. These elements are present in both bridal and funeral laments, underscoring the interconnectedness of joy and sorrow in human experiences.

Instrumental Laments

As James Wilce suggests that "lamentation is a discursive and musical genre linked with crying and funerary observances, but also used in other contexts" (Wilce 2000; 25). This chapter's final category of laments outside funerals includes an improvisatory, instrumental music genre known in Albania as *kaba*. Local population anticipate the performance of such instrumental lament in festive occasions such as saint names, village celebrations, and weddings.[56] *Saze* (ensemble) performs kaba, an instrumental piece that imitates women's lamentation, embodying deep cultural and emotional expressions (Sugarman 1997:153).[57] Using fieldwork notes and conversations

[56] In Greece, this form of music is called *μοιρολόι* eng. Lament. This term refers to the term moirolói refers to several forms of lament, including a female vocal form performed in mourning and funerary ritual.

[57] Kaba, a Turkish word meaning 'low-pitched' or 'deep' (Sugarman 1997: 153). In addition, Carol Silverman discusses the Bulgarian Romani musical form known as kaba zurna, performed in western Turkey and Bulgaria, suggesting that this musical style has been adopted by the clarinet (Silverman

with modern artists, this part investigates the relationship between kaba and women's sorrow.

Mostly performed in southern Albania, kaba is seen as an emulation of women's funeral lamentations that ends with a dance-like tune in duple time (Lolis 2003: 31). Kaba has two main sources: while the sorrow kaba emerged from and was refined via traditional vocal music, the pastoral kaba is drawn from and developed by traditional musical instruments (Tole 2023: 39). These several roots help to explain the complex and varied character of the kaba in Albanian traditional music.[58]

The kaba combines musical elements from traditional multipart vocal music and intertwines it with the instrumental repertoire used in celebrations. The use of vocal characteristics enhances the performance interpretation of the kaba (Tole 2023; 44). When a performance reaches its emotional peak, people often describe it as *e qau me kaba* (he wept with kaba), *e qara me gërnet* (crying with a clarinet), or *e qara me violinë* (crying with a violin). Furthermore, specific melodies of laments are sometimes referred to by the performer's name, such as "e qara e Laverit" (the crying of Laver),

2012: 28). However, Determining the precise moment when a particular part of Albanian traditional music began to be called Kaba is challenging.

[58] In this chapter, I will primarily explore the lament kaba. The pastoral kaba, also known as Tosk kaba, is developed as a monodic variation of melodic form with a single-part musical structure. It is typically played in meters of 3/8, 6/8, and 7/8 (Tole 2023: 40-43)

highlighting the personal connection and emotional depth conveyed through these musical expressions.

Kaba is typically performed and often improvised by a small ensemble known as a saze, which traditionally includes instruments such as the clarinet, violin, short-necked lute, frame drum, and occasionally the accordion. The emergence of the first saze ensemble can be traced back to 1900, a similar period where we can also notice the introduction of the clarinet as an instrument to perform in celebrations (Tole 2023; 45, Mazaraki 1985; 24). A notable feature of kaba is its similarity to southern Albanian polyphony and polyphonic voices, with performances of female lamenters (see Chapter 3). In the ensemble, the clarinet leads as the first voice, or *marresi* (the taker), while the violin serves as the second voice, or *kthyersi* (the answerer). Other instruments, such as the lute and tambourine, play the role of a drone (Tole 2015).

Kaba, like other forms of funerary laments, uses the pentatonic scale, allowing all voices to be in complete harmony and intertwined. Much like women's lamentation, where shared pain unites the voices into a seamless expression of grief, kaba combines the instruments and voices in a harmonious blend, making it difficult to distinguish the individual sound sources. In many villages throughout southern Albania, elderly residents assert that kaba served as "a commemorative function in prescribed social

events" (Kondi 2012; 192). During celebrations, musicians were expected to honor those who had passed away or been lost before commencing the festivities.

Kaba has two parts, and they represent the duality life-death, the connection and separation, and the celebration and grief. The slow movement symbolizes mourning and loss, and the fast movement celebrates and symbolizes life. In Albania, this duality is seen as two sides of the same coin. One side is the transition from a sorrowful lament to a joyful dance, mirroring the cyclical nature of life (Pistrick 2017; 141). This structure acknowledges honoring the deceased while at the same time embracing life.

My music high school teacher, Kostas Lolis, a musician who has devoted his entire life to researching and performing polyphonic music and instrumental laments in Epirus and south Albania, often used to say, "moirologia are a popular form full of notes of pain and lament." Lolis explained that when listening to these performers, one does not hear notes or witness technical virtuosity; instead, every emotion is conveyed, and it feels as if the instrument itself is lamenting. This deep expression of pain and crying, mainly through instruments like the clarinet and violin, is a common technique employed by Epirus and southern Albanian musicians specializing in this distinctive musical and underscores the emotional depth of the region (Maher 2019; 25).

The ability of musicians such as Laver Bariu, Ethem Qerimaj, Aurel Qirjo and many others to communicate emotions using instruments to mimic the human voice in mourning rituals reflects the relationship between music and emotion. The melodies become a shared language of sorrow and remembrance, and the performer is the bridge that connects emotions and audience.

> "You need pain, you need longing, you need to feel everyone around needs to hear you crying with your instrument. They are expecting through you to relive the moments of happiness and sorrow, they need through your notes to be able to say the last farewell to the people they do not have near anymore. And your notes should not be just notes but stories. The story of the uncle who lost his mother, the story of the grandmother whose son left for America for a better life, the story of that daughter that got married and is in a foreign land and misses home." (interview with Vasilis Kostas, Santa Cruz 2022).

The quote from Vasilis Kostas, a well-known laouto player, emphasizes on how deeply music relates to emotions and how much audience needs music to express their emotions, and to narrate their stories through the notes. Kostas stresses that for a musician, when performing instrumental, laments, pain, and longing are fundamental elements to effectively convey emotions through their instrument. His belief that musical notes should tell stories and are associated with personal and collective histories marks the transformation of personal grief into a shared experience through instrumental laments.

South Albania and Epirus are two areas that have suffered a difficult history, and that it continues to be marginalized. Migration has deeply affected villages and people. Songs powerfully evoke the memories of family members "lost in migration" as well as the experiences of past migrations (Pistrick 2017; 42).[59] Aurel Qirjo, a renowned violinist, specialized in kaba noted, "All our celebrations begin with kaba. It is our way of honoring those who have departed. This departure symbolizes both leaving the village and leaving this world." By starting celebrations with kaba, communities pay homage to those who have departed, acknowledging both physical departures, such as migration, and the ultimate departure from life. In these celebrations, kaba evokes a mood of sorrow, reflection, nostalgia, and for some listeners, this melancholic atmosphere can even encompass a sense of joy.

During my fieldwork in Albania and Epirus, I attended numerous celebrations, particularly in the villages of Ioannina, Kalpaki, and Parakalamos, which are renowned for their instrumental laments.[60] Although I had been familiar with this genre since my youth, it was only recently that I began to recognize the shared elements and differences between these

[59] See Pistrick (2009: 70) for a discussion of the translation of pain into musical form in songs of migration in Epirus

[60] For more about instrumental moirologia read Nicola Maher's dissertation "The Crying Clarinet: Emotion and Music in Parakalamos" (2019) where she analyzes the music perform in the villages of Epirus.

instrumental laments and women's lamentations.

Many interlocutors, including folk music performers like Vasilis Kostas, Michalis Tzixanis, and Aurel Qirjo, have noted a deep connection between instrumental and female laments. Aurel Qirjo in an interview with him when asked about instrumental vs women lament says:

> "Instrumental laments were initially performed on *fyell*[61] by shepherds. They drew on the sonic elements they heard from women lamenting and their solitary lives to create these instrumental laments. As the violin and clarinet were introduced into our society, these laments evolved to be played on these instruments. In instrumental laments, different voices function similarly to women's laments. Just as women had others to help them bear and break their pain, we use the violin to counterbalance the clarinet when it reaches its peak, and vice versa. Women cry with tears and lyrics, while we "cry" with notes." (interview, May 2024).

Female laments are traditionally performed by women and are deeply rooted in the vocal expression of grief, often without any instrumental accompaniment. In contrast, kaba is performed by male musicians using a variety of traditional instruments such as the clarinet, violin, short-necked lute, frame drum, and sometimes the accordion. The instrumental nature of kaba allows for more improvisation, with musicians creating spontaneous variations and embellishments on the basic melodic structure, thereby offering a more dynamic and expansive musical experience.

Here is an example of a female lament I recorded in 2018 in Gjirokastër

[61] Fyell bariu is an aerophone end-blown instrument traditionally played throughout Albania and other Albanian inhabited lands commonly associated with shepherds.

(see Figure 28). The melody was in a small range and repetitive. Although with each verse there were some slight melodic variations, the general melody remained the same throughout the lament. There are many repetitive notes and grace notes. The characteristic of this lament, however, is the interval of minor seventh that repeats twice before the conclusion of the verse that symbolizes the last breath before dying (Holst- Warhaft 1992; 70).

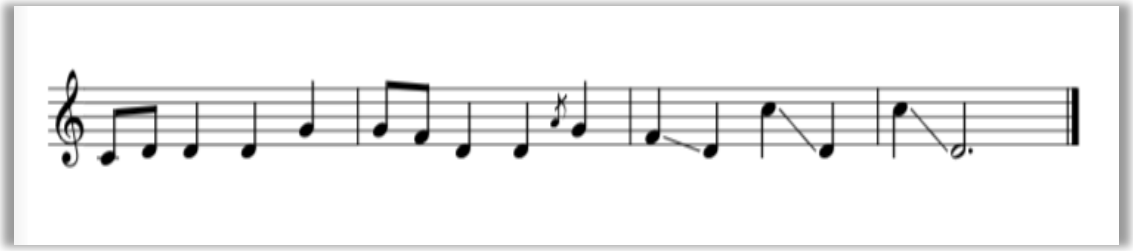


Figure 28: Transcription by the author.

Melismatic singing enhances the expressive power of the lament, allowing performers to delve into a more profound emotional territory. Such a method allows the singer to express a wide range of emotions within a brief musical phrase, effectively conveying the complex and nuanced feelings associated with mourning. This technique is particularly effective in traditional lamentations, where the intensity and variability of emotion are paramount.

The melody line of the following instrumental lament is more highly ornamented than that of the feminine laments already mentioned. Popular traditional violinist Michalis Tzixanis's performance of the violin line

captures this approach (see Figure 29).[62] The melody follows a descending contour with melismas. Like female laments, this piece incorporates repetitive notes and the intervals of minor seventh and minor third to construct the lament.

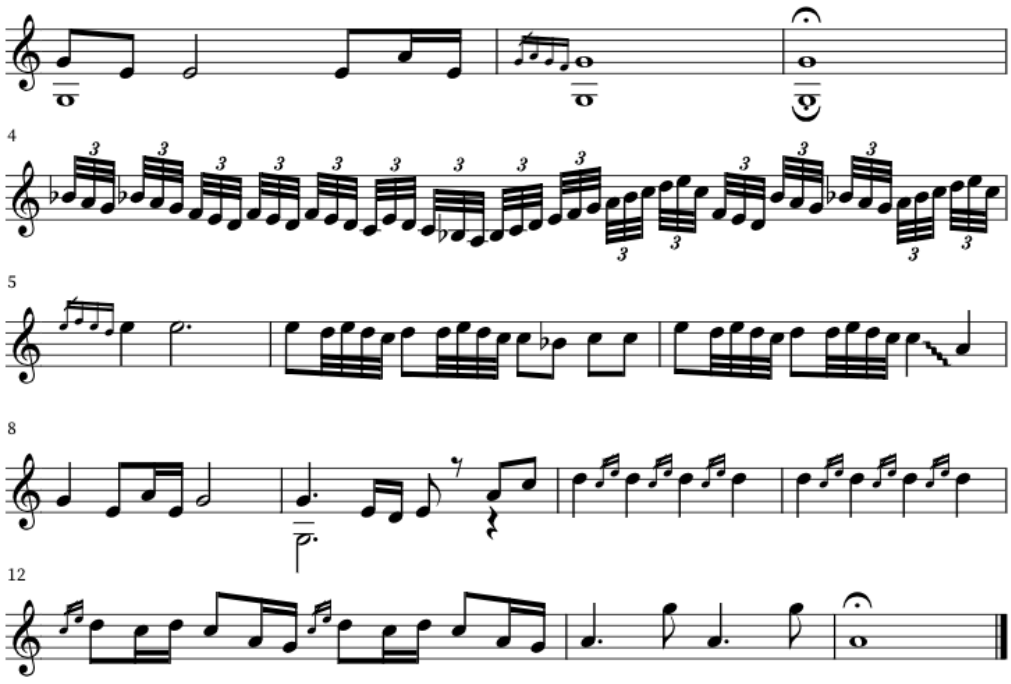


Figure 29:Instrumental lament. Transcription by the author.

[62] Michalis Tzixanis began playing the violin at a young age, deeply influenced by the traditional folk music he heard in his village from other musicians. Fascinated by the sound of the clarinet, he began imitating its melodies on the violin. Today, Tzixanis is a prominent violinist, performing with well-known singers like (Paola, Pantelidis, etc.)

.

In addition, Tzixanis use extensively vibratos for all the long notes and *gyrismata* (*γυρίσματα*) (turns) which are a series of improvisations within a single loop (melismas). Often displaying their technical talents and brilliance, these gyrismata let artists weave several musical concepts together. The combination of those elements creates an expressive and technically impressive performance, echoing the emotional depth and complexity found in traditional female laments. The characteristics and the timbre of laments are unique. Laments function as living stories, preserving narratives and emotions, commemorating the lives and deeds of those who have departed or migrated. They encapsulate the human experience, mirroring the interplay between life and death, connection and separation, and celebration and grief within the cultural structure.

Conclusion

The exploration of laments reveals a deep cultural and emotional landscape in the regions of southern Albania. As there is a deep connection between joy and despair, lamentation expressed during funerary rituals or during celebrations acts as a vehicle to express grief and sorrow and a bridge between the world of the living and the dead. Although mourning is

associated with loss and death, it provides a unique role in the context of weddings and event celebrations.

In many communities, marriage and death are viewed as parallel stages, where someone leaves one world for another. The bridge symbolizes the transition of the bride from her family to the groom's family (Sugarman, 1997: 242). Bridal laments are performed the moment the groom's family prepares to take the bride to her new home. As this moment marks the symbolic separation from her familiar to the unfamiliar world, bride's family changes the happy lyrics to bridal laments. These laments can range from celebrating the bride's beauty and her well manners, to providing advice for the new life, teasing her worries, and even expressing their pain and longing that she will no longer fully belong to them. Although, communities often refer to these laments as wedding songs, avoiding the association with funerary laments, they share similar purpose and are closely linked with laments.

Another form of laments outside the context of funerals is instrumental laments. In regions marked by economic hardship laments preserve the memories and emotional experiences of their communities. They reflect a history of migration, loss, and longing, encapsulating the enduring spirit of the people despite the adversities they face. Through their music, these

communities maintain a connection with their past and a sense of continuity with their cultural heritage.

Instrumental laments such as kaba (or moirologia) performed in the beginning of every celebration it is used to honor and pay respect to the people who have left the world (either because of migration or because they are no longer alive). While female laments are rooted in vocal traditions resonating the pain and sorrow of separation and loss, instrumental laments, performed mainly by male musicians, incorporate a wider range of improvisation and technical virtuosity. These performances are characterized by their rich ornamentation, use of melismas, and the blending of multiple musical ideas within a single piece.

In conclusion, laments in southern Albania are not merely musical expressions; they are vital cultural practices that embody the collective memory and emotional resilience of their communities. They serve as a bridge between the living and the dead, the past and the present, offering a space for communal mourning and celebration. By understanding and preserving these traditions, we gain insight into the profound ways in which music can articulate the deepest aspects of human experience, fostering a sense of unity and continuity amidst the ever-changing landscape of life.

Chapter Seven
Conclusion

Figure 30: The announcement of demise of my grandmother on Facebook.

On January 23, 2024, my family lost my paternal grandmother in Tirana, Albania. She was 84 years old, and I had frequently quoted her and her laments in this dissertation as she spent forty years grieving for her husband. My uncle shared the announcement of her passing through a Facebook post (see Figure 30). He tagged all family members, and within less than an hour, the post received over 500 condolence comments and over 200 likes. The next step for the family was to arrange for the funeral home's

services, "Parajsa" (Paradise), to handle the final arrangements and coordinate the trip from Tirana to Gjirokastër, her final resting place. As per funerary customs, the departed should stay at their residence before the funeral so the family can receive condolences inside the house.

The main room, witness to the joys of twenty years spent raising children alongside a devoted husband and another twenty as the household matriarch, was now feeling empty. Unlike the traditional settings, she told me during our meetings that men stayed in separate rooms from women. Today, in one room, friends and family gathered to bid their final goodbye. The absence of many family members, including myself and her first grandson, who has resided for the last eight years in Germany, was a constant reminder of the wave of migration that has been constant in Albania since the early 1990s.

Although physically distant, I connected through Messenger throughout the funeral, and what resonated was the absence of the lamentation that had woven through her voice in the same living room for over four decades. There were tears and heartfelt expressions of grief, but the cadence of laments, that melodic embodiment of sorrow that she carried for so long, departed with her the moment she was no longer alive. At that moment, the echoes of her own laments seemed to pause, exposing the silent

departure from this world as well as this art that had been an inseparable companion through her own journey.

The reason why I am starting with this personal story is because the journey I started around the summer of 2018 in exploring lamentation has been a very personal and enriching journey. It has entangled my own experiences with the voices and the stories of people who have lived this tradition throughout their lives. The laments I used to listen to as a young kid from my grandmother used to be an unknown pattern of words and melodies. After this journey, these laments have become part of my cultural identity.

The people I interviewed during those years did not only become part of my research but also part of my life. I was in the privileged position to glimpse moments of joy and vulnerability. I was able to see their stories not just as data I used for this dissertation but as reflections of their personal experiences. The people I interviewed during those years did not only become part of my research but also part of my life. I was in the privileged position to witness moments of happiness and sadness.

"Lament is the language of the soul, the music of the heart," said Andro, summarizing the core of this tradition (interview with Andro, Gjirokastër 2020). People used to express sorrow, express their feelings, honor their loved ones, and, most importantly, preserve their memories through

time and throughout their community. The role of women was to stand as the "tradition-keepers" of lamentation to keep the memory and cultural continuity, to navigate through a patriarchal society, craving a space for expression and salvation from grief. "We sing the laments of our mothers, and our daughters will sing ours. It is a chain that binds us together." This statement emphasizes the intergenerational transmission and the deep connection between women and the practice of lament (interview with Andro Koçollari, Gjirokastër 2023). However, as I witnessed during my grandmother's funeral and as I heard from members of the Koçollari family, the tradition of lamentation, as these women knew, had all but faded.

This dissertation has sought to illustrate the powerful expressions of women through an analysis of the tradition of lamentation, tracing its evolution through the lens of history marked by turbulent times, different regimes, and significant socio-economic changes. It is about how lamentation shapes belonging and how creating lyrics in the way only women create can forge an identity. I have explored how, through lamentation, people navigate, engage, and resist the structures imposed upon them, particularly under strict and oppressive regimes. My discussions are organized around ethnographic vignettes highlighting local comprehensions of tradition and manifestations of grief and emphasizing how these traditions are lived, felt, and performed within the southern Albanian community.

It is evident in this dissertation why lamentation is such an important tradition for a small country such as Albania. Women perform laments such as "e qara me bote" and "e qara me like" in the southern region. They are characterized by their improvisational, melismatic, and polyphonic qualities. At the same time, in the northern areas, gjama has monophonic qualities and mirrors a robust patriarchal society. Regardless of the lamentation from a group of men or women, these practices create a cathartic space where the pain signifies an existential condition for both the deceased and the mourner (Kondi, 2012).

Lamentation is an experience of emotional belonging and is considered a woman's tradition. It is not only a personal expression of grief but an expectation from women in society as it is closely related to upholding honor within a household (Magrini, 2005). In societies where shame and honor are explicitly linked to women, communal expressions of emotions have a direct link to gender (Patrick, 2015), and lamentation is a tradition passed down from mother to daughter. “Lament is like a river, always flowing, always changing, but carrying the same waters of our ancestors” (interview with G.K. Gjirokastër, 2023). This metaphor captures lamentation as this rich and vibrant tradition that can adapt to every change. It emphasizes the strength of women practicing these traditions despite all

social and political changes. At the core, lamentation is individual expression and communal bonding that share the same idea: shared tears give comfort.

However, what happens when sharing tears could prove a dangerous game for everyone? In times when "the regime silenced even our tears," laments showcase the resilience and the capacity to adapt under authoritarian regimes (interview with S. Mirakaj, Tirana 2023). Living under the extreme conditions imposed by the communist regime, these persecuted women had to overcome the trauma of losing their children and family members. Some did not have the freedom to express their grief, and others did not want to show their enemy that they had become "weak"; therefore, their only path was to continue their lives in silence. The narratives of lamentation within the walls of the camps could possibly raise awareness about the horrors the persecuted families survived. The ability of laments to endure and transform in difficult circumstances shows how lamentation recreates an essential role in navigating grief amidst hardship.

It is important not to attach the suffering of the survivors only to the past. Conversations with survivors provide an excellent understanding that the trauma and pain they experienced persist even today. Their stories, thirty years after the fall of the regime, are still ignored by both people and the government. In this dissertation, I aim to listen to their stories and their laments to identify trauma and pain. As Deborah Kapchan says, “Listening is

slow ethnography." (Kapchan 2017; 278). I personally tried to critically listen to their struggles, their pain, and their grief. Listening to them was significant because it offered a pathway to reconciliation and liberation. It also allowed these survivors to feel "heard," which often aided in processing their negative feelings. "After talking together, I feel better. I feel our fight was worth it. We fought for the new generation to be free. Observing individuals take a genuine interest in our narrative, we all feel that our endeavors were worth it," said my interlocutor, Mr. Mirakaj.

As anthropologist James Wilce underscores, the tradition of laments has become nowadays a "backward" tradition in people's eyes. This tradition no longer aligns with modern and progressive ideas people would like to follow (Wilce 2009; 140). Modernization influenced the continuation of laments in Albania. These influences resulted in communities attempting to preserve or adapt to the new tradition the West brought into the country to align with the rest of Europe (Tochka, 2012). The appearance of funerary homes reflects the changes during the last few years in Albania due to social, cultural, and economic changes. Today's mourning period lasts only a few days instead of weeks or months. An increasing number of families opt for funeral homes, preferring not to have people in their own homes. The migration, modernization, and, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the landscape of lamentation. In response to the limitations imposed by the

governments in the last four years, there has been a considerable shift towards privatization and digitalization of mourning, where traditional practices are being adapted for virtual spaces.

One day Lele asked "Why should we always see what other Western countries do? What makes their traditions better than ours?" I replied that there is no good or lousy tradition, but I can see that a world shaped by global forces needs much strength to preserve and celebrate cultural heritage. Even if Chapter Six highlights the numerous challenges this tradition faces today, I want to emphasize how important it is to conduct additional research to fully understand the strategies that could help us ensure the survival of this tradition. Government sponsorship, the formation of diverse music groups, the presentation of cultural programs, and the creation of various workshops for diverse audiences can help to introduce the tradition to the younger generation.

Charles Seeger says, "There is a great deal we can do about change. We can study it. Frankly, there is nothing else to study (1963: 215)." In the case of southern Albanian lament, I feel that it is my responsibility to assign significance to a tradition that I have seen overshadow throughout my life. Intensifying marginalized voices, going through the complex connections between past and future, and assigning significance to traumas, I want to provide an outlet where the rich tradition of lament remains relevant in this

modern world. This study presents different opportunities for future research. One area of focus is the analysis of specific aspects of lamentation across different regions of Albania. Another direction is to analyze in more depth the impact of globalization and modernization in these traditions. How have younger generations adapted, and what are governments and communities doing to preserve those traditions? Finally, an important aspect that comes out of this research is the potential of lamentation in the context of trauma and grief.

The true strength of laments lies in the expression of sorrow and the ability to honor life, create and elevate heroes in the eyes of the community. Through lamentation, the voices of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, generation after generation, were able to transform grief into hope, hope into resilience, and resilience into identity. When I started writing this dissertation, the people I contacted could not understand why scholars outside Albania were interested in laments. This dissertation is the first attempt to present the practice of lamentation about the different timelines of Albania's history and how it shapes gender roles. To my knowledge, it is the first dissertation to examine how lamentation serves as a vehicle for communal and personal healing in a communist regime and how it has been affected by the changes of modern times, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

During my recent trip to Albania, I met with Lele and shared that my project is coming to an end. She responded, "I am glad you came now. In another ten years, you will not find anyone lamenting in this country". I do not know if her words will prove prophetic, but what I do know is that, in my own experience of grief, laments served as a catalyst for confronting pain and navigating feelings of separation and loss while at the same time healing and recovering.

Appendix A

Stage	Description	Differences between "e qara me bote" and "e qara me ligje".
1. Introduction	A woman or women begins with a loud wail and cry giving everyone the indication that a misfortune has happened.	*E Qara me Botë*: Emphasizes raw, uncontrolled cries to express shock and sorrow. *E Qara me Ligje*: Structured introduction with poetic phrases.
2. Personal Tribute	The lamenter recounts personal stories or characteristics of the deceased, often improvising.	Both forms involve storytelling, but E Qara me Ligje uses more structured and poetic language.
3. Collective Mourning	Other women join in by providing the *iso* (drone) or repeating key phrases, creating a communal atmosphere.	*E Qara me Botë*: Spontaneous participation. *E Qara me Ligje*: Coordinated responses and harmonies.
4. Transition	The lament shifts focus to broader themes like fate, death, or community support.	*E Qara me Ligje*: This stage includes moral reflections, while *E Qara me Botë* remains more emotional.

Table 2: This table describes the stages of mourning practices in southern Albania. It also highlights the differences between E Qara Me Bote and E Qara Me Ligje.

Appendix B

Activities	Explanation	Traditional south Albanian Weddings	Weddings During Communism	Weddings After 1990[63]
Sunday before the wedding: The Rice Sunday (E Diela e Orizit)	In the afternoon both families will invite few friends and clean 2-3 kg rice and candies.	✓	✗	✗
Monday: Mill Day (E Hena ne mulli)	Family members will go to the mill to collect flour for the wedding day	✓	✗	✗
Tuesday: Logistics	They will invite all the staff they would need in the wedding	✓	✗[64]	✗[65]
Wednesday: The wood day	9-10 family members go to collect wood	✓	✗[66]	✗
Thursday: Dowry Day (Dita e Pajes)	At bride's house friends and family organize the dowry	✓	✓	✗[67]
Thursday Afternoon: The night of dough (Nata e brumit)	The ceremony that starts the food preparation for the wedding.	✓	✗	✗
Friday: Guests and Friends will arrive	Celebrating with friends and family	✓	✓	✗[68]

[63] Even today, some families still try to carry out traditional rituals, but there is a growing trend of younger people opting for more westernized wedding ceremonies. These weddings typically last for just one day, with many couples choosing to have a joint wedding with guests from both families. Some couples also prefer to have a single ceremony, with or without bridesmaids, followed by a big celebration.

[64] Logistics are done at least 2-3 months in advance.

[65] Logistics are made at least 6-12 months prior the wedding.

[66] Some families will do it as a symbolic ritual. Couple people would decorate wood and bring it at the bride's home.

[67] Although not required and majority of people do not offer dowry, some people keep the tradition by gifting both the bride and groom present.

[68] Although majority of weddings are still scheduled either on Saturday or Sundays couples decide independently if they want to celebrate with friends prior the wedding celebration.

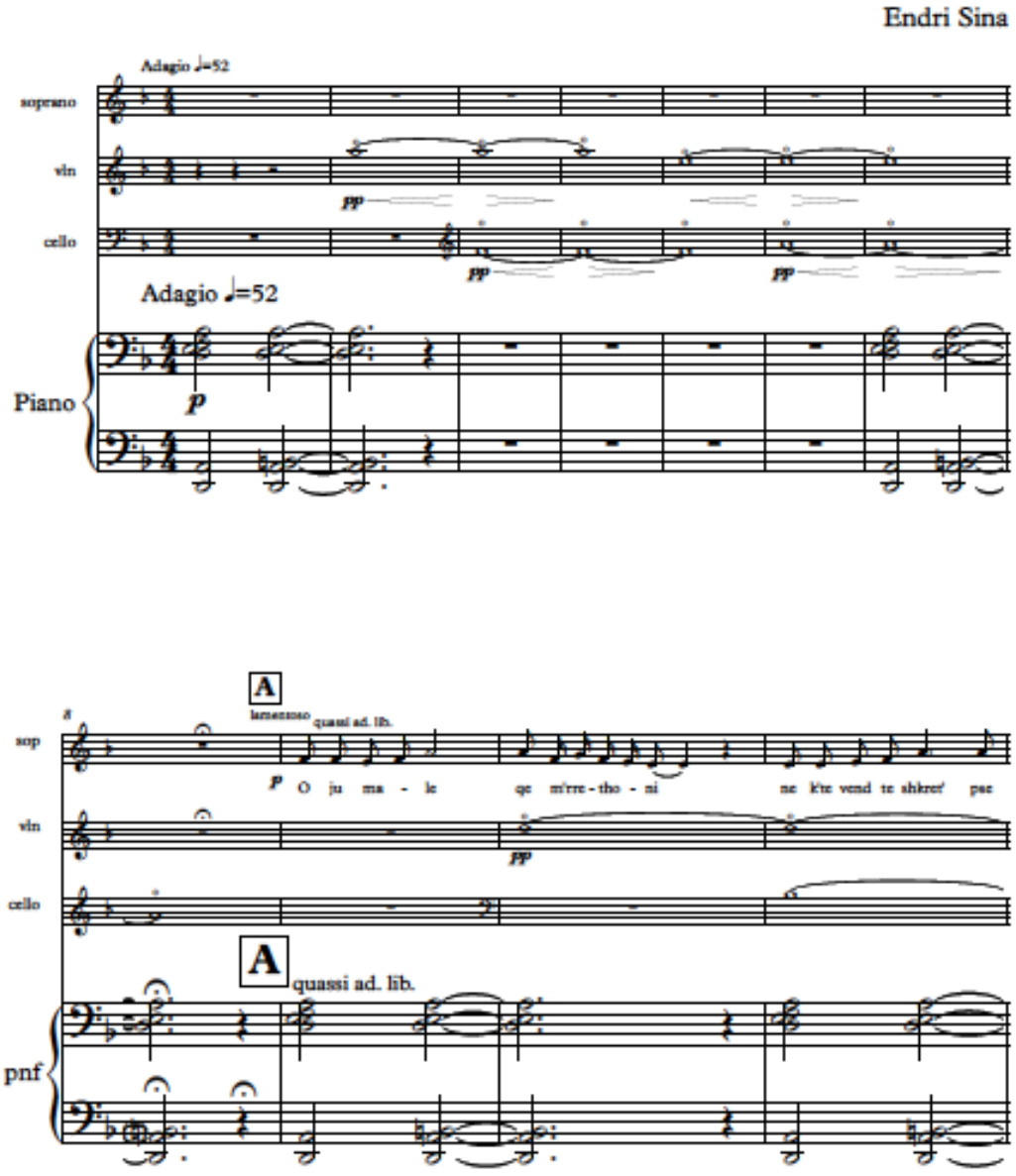
	and preparing for the following days			
Saturday: Dancing and Singing – Wedding Celebration	Celebrations happening in both groom's and bride's houses	✓	✓	✓
Sunday: Bride leaves her house to join her new house	Groom's family pick up the bride. Songs (Bridal laments)	✓	✓	✓[69]

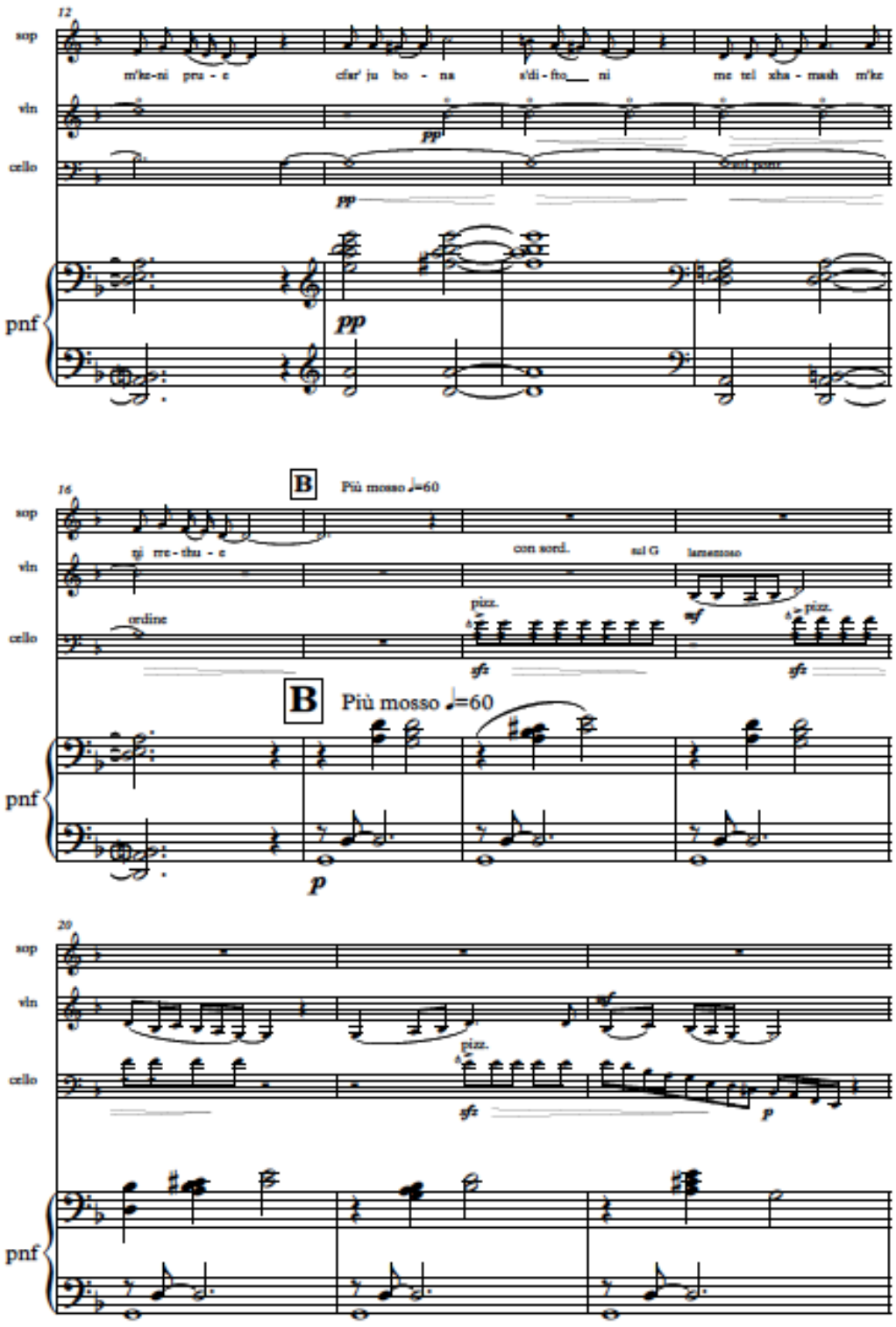
Table 3: Wedding Timeline

[69] Today many young couple live together prior the wedding. However, we can still observe couples that opt to make the last wedding ritual of taking the bride from her house and others who prefer not to.

Appendix C

The introduction of the lament composed by Professor Endri Sina.

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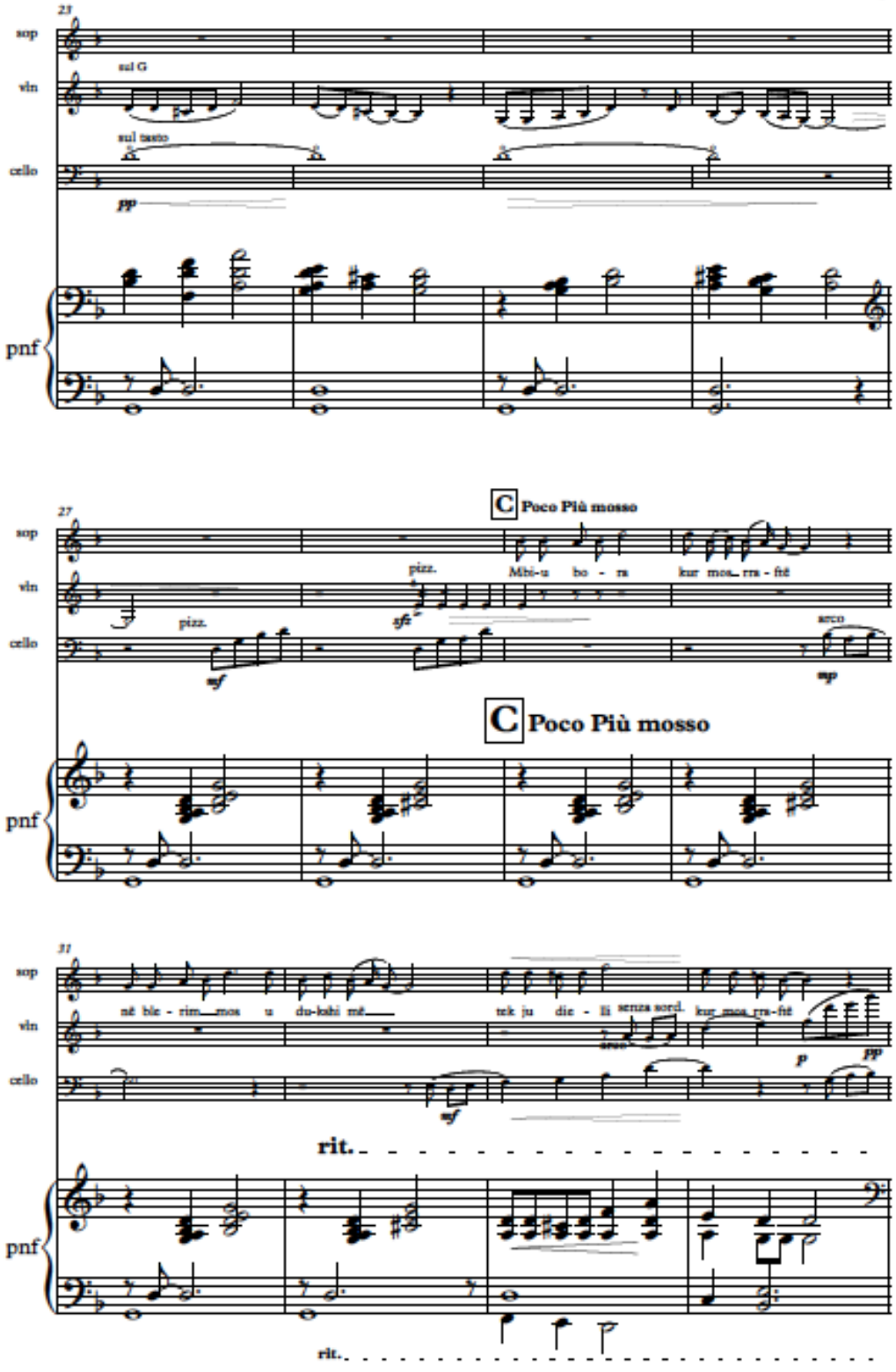
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31
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Personal Communication and Interviews

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