



From the communist point of view: Cultural hegemony and folkloric manipulation in Albanian studies under socialism



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ABSTRACT

In the standard folkloric and ethnographic tradition of Albanian studies, various efforts to seize an authentic, traditional and popular culture, supposed to have really functioned in a society of official ideology, were devoted primordially to a catalogue of descriptivist and empiricist research, which only served to confirm the ultimate goal of constructing a primarily essentialized national specificity and a particularly antiquated view of national culture. Whereas the long-term continuities in the Albanian studies of people's culture (*kultura popullore*), which pre-dated and out-lived socialism, together with the ambiguous relationship to anthropology are emphasized elsewhere, in this paper we look more closely at the limited changes and innovations that occurred in the decades of communist regime in Albania. The aim is to uncover how the traditional ethnographic-folkloric studies of people's culture, marked by intellectual isolation and stigmatized by association with moralist and nationalist ideologies, were mobilized to service the shifting ideological needs and state policies towards the cultural hegemony of the communist regime.

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1. Introduction

This article stems from a question on cultural hegemonies in spaces of diversity, formulated with an invitation to give a presentation at a conference organized by the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies in Regensburg (Germany) in May 2015.¹ Some earlier articles focused more specifically on the folkloric archaism of the studies of “people's culture” (*kultura popullore*) in Albania (Doja, 2015), largely inspired by the nationalist *Kulturpolitik* and colonialist *Ostpolitik* of the German-Austrian tradition of *Volkskunde* (Doja, 2014a, b). In this article, the primary aim is to explore the ways in which cultural knowledge was created, and then used and misused under Socialism in Albania. It is our contention to argue that the methodological approach adopted by these studies, namely the folklorist, empiricist and historicist character facilitated the subversion of scholarship in this area into a political instrument of communist propaganda, cultural hegemony and state control.

In recent years an increasing number of works are dealing critically with related issues (Schwandner-Sievers, 2009; Hysa, 2010; Voell, 2011), including our own earlier (Doja, 1998) and more recent reflections (Abazi, 2010, 2011; Doja, 2013a, 2014a,

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¹ An earlier partial version of this article was also presented at the Conference on “The Rise of Anthropology in the Margins of Europe, 1945–1991”, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale (Germany), 9–10 March 2011 (Video at <http://youtu.be/NeQ1ECIQSRc>).

b, 2015).² The kind of critical elaborations taken up in this article are now current in anthropology and social science more generally, in cultural studies, in post-colonial theory, and more recently in post-socialist studies. They might be very attractive, particularly given the ordinarily pedestrian proceedings of much Albanian studies. Yet the danger of arbitrarily attributing to former writers motivations that stem indirectly from contemporary concerns is not to be minimized. The knowledge production must therefore be carefully contextualized and approached in detail with both a critical and an insightful eye, without falling into the trap of a simple ideological critique. We stick to a review of the communist period of Albanian folkloric-ethnographic studies, commenting on what most scholars actually achieved at these times, and highlighting how the reading of their products shed light on the fact that knowledge and politics are deeply intertwined.

From the communist point of view, people's culture had to turn into an ideal projection of the fixed idea of the communists as builders of a new emancipated world, a New Man and a new culture. The transformation mechanisms touched all sides of the cultural process, including the meaning of people's culture and the code that served to catalogue, analyze and interpret cultural production. To analyze this process we adopt a political anthropological perspective. In this sense, our approach is at once comparative, holistic and relativistic. In practical terms, we consider the contributions and research publications that unfolded in the cultural and political space of communist Albania in parallel with all cultural activities and institutional arrangements that constituted the discourse of the communist regime, including the interventions of state and party organizations in issues of people's culture that determined its new meaning, its new role and its new social status.

The arguments that itemize examples of how the manipulation of people's culture either takes place or is disputed, their critical assessment and the insights discussed here are firmly grounded in several sources from the bulk of publications in the genre of folkloric-ethnographic studies of people's culture produced during the socialist period in Albania, including the contributions to *Etnografia Shqiptare* (Yearbook of Albanian Ethnography), *Çështje të Folklorit Shqiptar* (Issues in Albanian Folklore) and *Kultura Popullore* (Journal of People's Culture), or to the national conferences on Albanian studies (1962, 1968, 1969), social issues (1969), folklore festivals (1973, 1978) and ethnographic studies (1976, 1983). Other primary sources include some Enver Hoxha's speeches and other Party documents that typically address many issues closely related to the scholarly production that is the subject of this study, including the education of youth with communist morality, the formation and consolidation of socialist mentality, socio-economic consequences of socialist transformations, changes in the socio-class structure of society, the diminution of rural and urban differences, the development of socialist relations within the family, the emancipation of women, the socialist ways of life, and so on.

On the role of ideology, the arguments of this study are better and more clearly substantiated by the programmatic articles in the Party periodical press, especially in the collection of *Rruga e Partisë* (Party Way), a monthly journal published by the Institute of Marxist-Leninist Studies and controlled by the Party Central Committee. The choice is determined by the very task of this "political and theoretical organ" of the Party press that was to lead the political and ideological education of state officials, party ideologues and research scholars, with contributions that reflected the real problems as perceived and intended by the ideological apparatus of the communist regime. Continuously, from its inception in 1953 to its termination in 1989, in every issue of the journal, there is no contribution without direct or indirect reference to important features of cultural research policy throughout the evolving conditions of the building of socialism. A careful examination of these contributions can highlight the real weight of the research strategy of the Albanian communist model, as they also show the involvement of a political and moral mystification in a form contradicted by the sociocultural situation in Albania.

In addition, the claims are substantiated by what could be termed the methodological opportunity of a primary lived experience that has made it possible to monitor more closely the substance and meaning of the scholarly discourse on people's culture and the politics of knowledge in Albania more generally. One of the authors is a member of the young generation of scholars who used to work under political pressure as a junior researcher at the Institute of People's Culture, where he gained a primary lived experience on the politics of knowledge under the communist regime, and eventually rebelled against it. Another author is a member of the new generation of political scientists who in the past have suffered the most from the cultural reference of belonging both to the old class of landowners in South Albania and to the alienated class of deep-rooted intellectuals hostile to the communist regime. After a consequent full training and long experience working in modern anthropology and political science respectively, building on earlier critical examinations of the folkloric archaism of people's culture studies in Albania from "an insider/outsider perspective" (Doja, 2015), and the materialist historicist descriptivism in Albanian studies from the perspective of modern analytical and political approaches (Abazi, 2010, 2011), an additional experiential intersubjectivity is gained from a personal experience to substantiate the political dimension of the problems raised.

Finally, at this time we shall be retrospective, concerned more with taking stock rather than with proposing the kinds of new directions that must be addressed at another time. In the first section, we provide a general characterization of Albanian native studies glorifying and essentializing one's own people's culture. In three following sections, we distinguish three main phases in the course of socialist changes, which are aimed to show the linkage between evolving projects of people's culture engineering and the increase in power of the Hoxha regime in Albania. Until about the mid-1950s, the Sovietization and de-Sovietization of communist ideas of internationalism moved away everything that could suspect a whiff of reactionary

² Some useful considerations are more specifically intended as a "practical necessity" how to use this body of works, more often for the completion of graduate requirements, and hence more closely related to works on specific topics, such as customary law (Bardhoshi, 2009), collectivization (Lelaj, 2011), urban studies (Hysa, 2011), or housing (Dalipaj, 2012).

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