

Celebrating the Imagined Village: Ways of Organizing and Commenting Local Soundscapes and Social Patterns in South Albanian Feasts

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AS THE *muhabet* (VERBAL DISCOURSE) FOLLOWS distinct patterns and regulations in relation to established concepts of *nder* (honour) and *turp* (shame) in Albanian society, toasting, music-making and dancing follow comparable rules. Summer feasts in South Albania play a crucial role in displaying and reaffirming but also contesting this concept of *radhë* (order). Being marked by the omnipresence of return migrants – they provide a platform to celebrate an ‘imagined village’ in its social, symbolic and cultural sense. Within these feasts migrants assume a particular role, challenging the local idea of social order. An interdisciplinary approach in analyzing these feasts reveals dynamic interrelations between systems of how to organize soundscapes and social representations. The article presents the dynamics and contradictions involved in constructing such concepts locally, and their visibility in performance. It demonstrates how locals in the orthodox villages of Dhoksat and Selta give social meaning to the simultaneity of instrumental and vocal sounds, dance and *muhabet*. Furthermore it focuses on how dancing, playing and singing are valued in specific aesthetic terms, referring to the social network of the village, functioning as strategies of inclusion and exclusion into the village community.

South Albania, stretching from the Shkumbin River in the north to the border with Greece in the south, is marked by the coexistence of Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities. Two of the main regions of South Albania are Labëria and Toskëria, divided by the Vjosa

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River. Culturally this religious and regional diversity is often expressed in the juxtaposition of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ or people ‘me kulturë’ (with culture) versus people ‘pa kulturë’ (without culture), referring reciprocally to Tosks and Labs or Christians and Muslims. A feature which in some respects unites Orthodox and Muslim villages in South Albania is the organization of collective village feasts, which may be connected to religious rituals such as *Bajram*,¹ the commemoration of Bektashi saints or Orthodox Easter, Christmas and the church patrons’ feasts. Some of these feasts were emptied of their original meaning or were forbidden during the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, who in 1967 declared Albania the first atheist state in Europe. After 1991, village feasts were reorganized and revived with new and transformed meanings.

With regard to musical practice, South Albania is marked – in contrast to North Albania – by a rich multipart singing tradition with two, three or four part-singing; a tradition that extends from the Skumbin valley southwards and eastwards up into neighbouring Macedonia and northern Greece. In addition, the clarinet-ensemble *saze*, comparable to the Greek *kumpaneia*, accompanies local festivities. During the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, himself a native of the town of Gjirokastra, traditional music became instrumentalised as a ‘cultural artefact’ (Clifford 1988) that underwent a process of ‘cultural objectification’ (Handler 1988) on the stages of the National Folk Festival, held regularly in Gjirokastra.

The research for this article was carried out in August 2008 in South Albania, covering an area from the deep South (in Skrapari, Malëshova, Përmet, Lunxhëria, Gjirokastra and Dropull) to the Shkumbin valley (Shpati).² We will concentrate on observations in either Orthodox Christian or Muslim villages in the two regions of Lunxhëria (Orthodox) and Shpati (Orthodox, Muslim). The two selected regions are marked by distinct historic, economic and ethnographic characteristics, which need to be outlined first.

The region of Lunxhëria situated in the southern part of South Albania, belonging to the district of Gjirokastra, is marked by both internal and external discourse as an Orthodox region, forming the basis of Lunxhot identity itself (de Rapper 2005, 178). Only one village



(Erind) of the 9 to 20 villages usually associated with this ethnographic region (*krabinë*) possesses a Muslim majority. Lunxhëria is inhabited, according to de Rapper (2005, 174), by three population groups: (1) Lunxhots, who call themselves ‘ethnic Lunxhots’ and are called ‘villagers’ by others, (2) Aromanians, who call themselves ‘shepherds’ and are called ‘newcomers’ by locals,³ and (3) Muslims, who trace their origin to Labëria or consider themselves autochthonous. Fluid ethnic boundaries exist between these different groups inhabiting the area (de Rapper 2005, 175). These fluid boundaries in reality contrast strikingly with the way locals fix and demarcate their social and cultural space, particularly during feasts. Most of these are dedicated to Orthodox religious events such as the patrons’ feasts of Shën Gjergji [Saint George], Shën Ilia [Saint Elias], Shën Llazari [Saint Lazarus] or Shën Maria [Saint Mary⁴] (Bogdani 1995, 40–45). Furthermore the region may be described as a transitory zone between Labëria and Toskëria. According to the villagers, the cultural division between Toskëria and Labëria is demarcated by the river Drinos, associating all villages on its right side, including Lunxhëria, with Tosk culture,⁵ while the left side of the river (such as Lazarat and other Muslim villages of the regions of Kurvelesh e Sipërm and Kardhiq) is conceptualized as Labëria. The predominantly Muslim villages on the other side of the river are portrayed by Lunxhots as ‘others’ in social and cultural terms. This affirmation of a local identity based on social compactness resulting in cultural singularity is put forward frequently by South Albanian local intellectuals (e. g. Dedi and Koçi 2006).

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Nevertheless, depicting Lunxhëria as a mere border region in the ethnographic and religious sense would mean to neglect the historical ties between the Orthodox Lunxhots and the Muslims of Kurvelesh. Because of a lack of local labour, Muslims have come to work primarily as shepherds in Lunxhëria since before the Second World War (Bogdani 1995, 25). And although marriages were traditionally organized within the villages, Muslims in Lunxhëria even arranged their marriages with inhabitants of Lazarat and Picari outside the region (Bogdani 1995, 26). These relations continued to exist during communist times.

The region of Shpati is situated in the northern part of South

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Albania, belonging to the district of Elbasan. It is confined by the Shkumbin River in the north and by Devoll in the south. Shpati is divided into two main parts: Mountain Shpati or Upper Shpati, and Field Shpati or Lower Shpati to the west of the mountain area. Due to the fact that a considerable part of the population in Lower Shpati originates from Upper Shpati, they are also called ‘second Shpati’ and ‘first Shpati’ respectively. Upper Shpati is made up mostly of Orthodox villages, which were self-sustaining peasant communities before the communist regime. Lower Shpati is composed of more Muslim than Orthodox villages, which used to live under the *çiflik* (feudal estates) system. The two sub-regions can be understood only in terms of their relationship and interdependence on one another and in their ways of dealing with and expressing these differences and similarities (Dalipaj 2007). The historical borders of Shpati as a region have been moveable, involving also the groups of villages of Dumreja and Sulova.⁶ Although classified ethnographically as part of Toskëria (South Albania), the region of Shpati involves also cultural features that are claimed to be typical of both South and North Albania. Hence, like Lunxhëria, Shpati has been dubbed a transitional area. In the region of Shpati, each Orthodox village has its own Saint’s Day.⁷ These religious feasts have a social symbolic meaning in the sense that they could be ‘appropriated’ by a certain kin, a symbolic connection of kin and a specific religious feast being particularly strong in the region of Shpati.⁸ The Orthodox feasts in Shpati are visited regularly by Muslims and vice versa.

In most of the feasts observed, we were guided by local males, whose families were considered ‘indigenous’ and ‘representative’ of local traditions. These collected comments and explanations were confronted with those of outsiders, musicians and singers present at the feasts. This method allowed us to balance three different points of view on the feast: that of the active (local) insider (in terms of a common spatial, religious and/or kinship belonging), that of the active–passive insider–outsider (coming from another South Albanian village or region) and our own outsider–outsider observations ‘out-of-their-culture’ (in terms of spatial, religious and kinship distance).

Due to the lack of reliable literature on the nature and character of



contemporary Albanian feasts (with the exception of Sugarman 1997) this article refers to a number of studies carried on about Greek village communities and feasts (Caraveli 1986; Panopoulos 1996; 2003; 2005; Zografou 2007). Taking into account the singularity of each feast as an event of local significance, we are conscious that the results of our research do not surpass the limits of a first case study and require further comparative research to discuss the first hypotheses of this article.

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Albanian villages⁹ are marked by families of various sizes and structures and of various economic standards of living, residing as a relatively small social community. The landscape where these families reside can be described as responding to their material, spiritual and social needs (Muka 1992, 69). The village is related to a specific territory with known and firm borders including dwellings, private land around them, and the land owned by the village community (Gjergji 1982, 151). As a rule, these villages are composed of a limited number of patrilineal kindred groups¹⁰ organised in quarters which mostly correspond to these specific groups.¹¹ According to Zojzi (1949) and Ulqini (1987) the Albanian villages were historically the smallest administrative units, governed to different degrees by state policies as well as by local customary law and councils of elders. In order to manage common resources, the Albanian village life was expected to be guided by an obligatory cohesion, sharing the same moral code and symbols. Traditionally, marriages were preferred to be arranged along lines of regional and religious endogamy and kin exogamy. After the collapse of the Hoxha dictatorship with its policy of rural retention, the consequent demographic changes, while preserving the ideal of kin exogamy, resulted in broader marriage choices.

SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FEAST

The end of summer is the high time for feasts. Particularly the months of August¹² and to a lesser degree September are preferred for Saints' feasts, marriages or village gatherings.¹³ Usually each such public festivity honouring a Saint, re-uniting the village and re-affirming identity and belonging, is termed a 'celebration' (*festë, festim*). The celebration includes a gathering in a public space, the shared consumption of food,

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discussion, singing and dancing. Each feast fulfils multiple overlapping symbolic and social functions. The main goal is the achievement of a certain joyful mood (*qejfi*) and social participation. A feast may be socially successful in two ways: involving as many actors as possible and involving musicians and singers who contribute through their singing and playing to social interaction and the attainment of the goal of *qejfi*.

Feasts reflect, as Rice has observed in the case of the Macedonian *sobor*, the village as a unit of social structure. For him 'an event like the *sobor* represents a segment of culture that encapsulates or concretizes some of a society's basic values and structures' (Rice 1980, 126). We follow his line of thought in looking at village feasts as symbolically charged events thought of as intrinsically connected to spatial, temporal and acoustic organization. For us South Albanian village feasts are representative settings for observing the expression and structuring of social acts. Each feast can be understood therefore as a symbolic celebration of each form of social organization: family, kin, village and of regional belonging. At the same time feasts may reflect the social stratification of the village based on the division of sex, age-group or social status. This does not mean that feasts should be treated as occasions for the expression of pre-established social structures or of bounded and named 'groups,' but rather as a forum of social innovation and negotiation 'in which boundary negotiation is an important activity' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983, 45). Feasts (and rituals) are not structural frameworks which are continuously repeated, but on the contrary performances in process being changed continuously by different social actors who adapt their actions to an ever-changing social, political and historical framework. According to Boissevain (1992) feasts are social events that are man-made and time-bound, displaying a regulated creativity. The feast itself is, if we follow Boissevain, made up of two contradictory properties: the ritual and the play. While with ritual he names the formal and ordered event, which is characterized by rules, hierarchy and the constraints of time and place, the play is 'associated with the negation of the ritual,' it is disordered, innovative, improvised, disrespectful of authority and potentially subversive (Boissevain 1992, 13). These two dimensions of the feast/ritual maintain a dynamic relation to each other: improvised and playful action becomes framed and



organized in order to exhibit local culture up to the point where the established rules become undermined again by improvised action. Although we distance ourselves from Boissevains' terminology of ritual and play, and his view of a strict juxtaposition of these two categories, we nevertheless affirm the double-sided nature of the feast between obligatory planned action and improvised behaviour. [169]

In the reality of the fieldwork these different and sometimes contradictory meanings of a feast, considered a unity by the locals, were often difficult to disentangle. In the case of Dhoksat, for example, the feast served firstly as a religious feast honouring Saint Mary, affirming local orthodox identity. Secondly, it served as a social and cultural display. The 'Cultural Patriotic Association Lunxhëria' (Shoqata Kulturore Atdhetare Lunxhëria) co-organized the collective performance of cultural elements (songs and dances), strengthening social cohesion. Thirdly, the feast served the reunion of the village community, incorporating the migrants that had returned for the event from Greece. Several villagers stated that this feast could be considered at the same time a 'meeting of generations' (takimi i brezave) bringing together different generations and geographically dispersed persons of Dhoksat origin.

Despite the fact that feasts are polysemantic they may be also socially closed or more opened towards 'Outsiders.' In Shpati celebrations, village and kin feasts, could be attended by people of other villages or by more distant relatives. This permeability of feasts through networks of affinity, friendship or godfatherhood is counterbalanced by certain conservative traits grounded in local ideology related to the order and the cultural outlook of the feast. Public festivities can be seen as a continuity of the feast's preparation in the family space or as a precursor of the feast's celebration in family space. This results in a social intermingling of private family sphere and public sphere of the village.

There are also feasts which attained a status beyond their local dimension as regional feasts attended by large numbers of inhabitants of the whole region. This was the case with the feast of Saint Mary on 15 August 2008 in Dhoksat, which served not only as a meeting point for the whole region of Lunxhëria,¹⁴ but even assumed a trans-

[170] regional character, incorporating people from neighbouring regions.¹⁵ These feasts are often accompanied by ritual sacrifices (*kurban*) (Dalipaj 2007).¹⁶ During the dictatorship, village and kin group feasts were celebrated by the villagers secretly, that means in private space. This survival was expressed in the presence of a small sacrifice (usually poultry) and a very limited and intimate lunch or dinner in the house, setting the celebration of religious rites apart from any public display.

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION AND SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATIONS ON FEASTS

Recent studies (Boissevain 1992) have shown that celebrations in the rural European context have been re-vitalized, re-traditionalized, and re-invented with the aim of strengthening local identities especially after the 1980s. This revitalization of feasts took place in three basic forms: (1) through the invention of new feasts, (2) through a renewed interest in spring and winter rituals associated with an 'older sphere' of local culture, and (3) through the re-valuation of Saint's feasts which coincided with the holiday return of migrants. The third form of revaluation of traditional feasts took place in Albania before the background of migration movements since the end of 19th century which accelerated changes in the structure and meaning of the feast. This development has to be positioned in a wider reaching multi-layered socio-economical transformation particularly after the fall of the communist regime in 1991, caused by massive internal and external movements of people. Villages have been abandoned since then, economically deprived of their labour force and 'muted' in the musical sense (Pistrick 2006).¹⁷ 'Traditional' feasts have undergone significant changes under the impact of this mass migration in the last years and due to the continuous alienation of social actors from each other and from village life. Through the presence of migrants and the memory of migration, the feast has become a common screen for the projection of an ideal village, rooted in nostalgia for the past.

Village feasts that celebrated social cohesion in the past are invaded now every summer by migrants, returning for vacation from Greece or Italy. Although these migrants are no longer part of the traditional social system of the village they are eager to participate in the feasts.



For them, feasting is a form of nostalgia, which is expressed and displayed most prominently through verbal discussions and migration songs (*këngë kurbeti*). Migrants evoke an idealized village, reconstructed from childhood or youth memories, conceived as juxtaposed to an illegal or 'black migration' (*kurbet i zi*) characterized through a collection of social deficiencies. At these feasts migrants celebrate primarily their 'origin' (*origjin*) and their belonging.¹⁸ As Lortat-Jacob (1994) argued in a cross-cultural analysis of feasts in Morocco, Sardinia and Romania, feasts are themselves characterized by 'contradictory properties' and possess at the same time a conservative and transforming function (Lortat-Jacob 1994, 7). In this sense the return of the migrants into their villages for festivities can be seen also as a revitalization act of rituals, which at the same time brings forth a drastic change in the social and cultural parameters of symbolic action. This process may be or may not be connected with an increased organization and 'framing' of the feast through cultural organizations or brotherhoods and the hidden shifting from a tradition 'in context' to a folklorized and/or commercialized tradition 'out-of-context.'¹⁹ The social group of migrants accelerates the transforming character of the feast and stimulates discourse about the 'contradictory properties,' questioning at times the very structure of the feast and its intrinsic aesthetic values.

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The visible and invisible presence of migration was particularly apparent at the feast of *Shën Mria* (as it is called in the local dialect) in Selta, Shpati. Most of the locals considered the feast held in 2008 as a poor example in terms of the participation of the local population and in terms of the cultural events offered. Among these deficiencies was multipart singing, which was completely lacking at the Shpati feast. The singer of the multipart group from neighbouring Nezhani could not gather enough group members because 'they were dispersed.' This 'poverty' of the feast was related by villagers to the demographic changes in the region caused by migration to Greece and by urbanization flows towards nearby Elbasan. Migration also shaped the place where the feast was held, the construction of the building, a chapel, was sponsored by a villager who earned his money in Greece.²⁰ At the same time this person dictated the musical taste of the feast, providing a laptop and speakers from which very loud music was played.

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Even the church bell, hung in an improvised setting between two trees, was a gift from Greece (Katerini). Clearly the feast was dominated by migrants returning for their summer holidays from Greece. While in the morning the ritual part of the feast took place under participation mostly of the elder generation of the village, the late morning and midday was dominated by the migrant youth, drinking, discussing and eager to dance to the music from the laptop. The feast ended around one in the afternoon, two hours earlier than usual as villagers complained, with people retreating into their family space to continue the celebration. Even to the villagers it was obvious that something in the structure of the feast had changed forever, that something was irrevocably lost.

THE LOCAL CONCEPT OF ORDER (RADHË),
TIME AND SPACE

All attempts to structure the feast first become visible in the temporal fixation through a date. It is here where the process of negotiation and contestation starts, because the people's attitude towards the dating of the village feasts is ambiguous: at times conservative, at times lavish.

The people of Lunxhëria for example celebrate the feasts according to the so called Greek calendar (Gregorian calendar). Saint Mary's, the village feast of Dhoksat, is celebrated on 15 August.²¹ Meanwhile, in Shpati people still use the so called 'Old Calendar' (Julian calendar), which locally is referred to as the *alla turka* calendar. That means that the feast of Saint Mary is celebrated on 28 August each year. In Shpati the approach towards the days of the feasts is very much conservative. Here we found the story of a young man from Selta with the surname Ranxha. Almost a decade earlier, after the young man had returned from migration, he insisted that the village celebrate should Saint Mary's on 15 August, as it was done in Greece. The inhabitants of Selta followed his advice. But after this change of date the young man fell accidentally from a mountain and died. The inhabitants interpreted this as divine revenge because of their changing the day of the feast, and turned to respect 'their old calendar.'²²

Another temporal order is aspired to *within* the feast. In Dhoksat the celebration takes place in the late evening, while the preparations



for it last all day, or begin even days before. The feast begins around 9 o'clock in the evening, arriving at its peak just before midnight. Afterwards the feast gradually loses its tension. Meanwhile in Selta the feast begins with the collective festivities in public space in the early morning. The festivity arrives at its peak around midday and by one in the afternoon people begin gradually to leave the festive space and to continue celebrating at home. Both upon their climbing up the hill to the chapel and on their return from the feast, they are 'greeted' by the monolith in remembrance of the local who tried to change the date of the feast.

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Every feast is related to a particular space, which can comprise various symbolic meanings. Such a classical feast setting is the central plane tree of the village, such as in Dhoksat,²³ a local grave of a Saint, such as in Kreshova and Tomorr, or a chapel, such as in Selta. The feast in Selta revealed an additional characteristic: the demarcation and 'framing' of (sound)space. Observable was the division between a dancing space 'framed' by banderols wishing well-being and blessings for the participants of the feast, a 'holy' fenced space around the chapel²⁴ and an informal space at the edge of the forest used as a picnic place for families. The division of the spaces was spanned acoustically by the music sounding from the speakers set up in the 'holy space' into the dancing space and the presence of a church bell (*këmborë*) between two trees in the dancing space (but associated with the holy space), which rang from time to time. A similar 'framing' of space was achieved through tables positioned at the edges of the dancing place in Dhoksat. There the most prestigious places were located opposite the entrance door, the less significant beside the entrance door. The long-stretched table opposite the door was occupied by local officials such as the mayor and the head of the cultural association. The tables at the entrance were occupied by Aromanians, considered by the older local families as 'having come from outside' and as *nouveau riche*. Instrumental music was coming from a symbolic place in which several meanings accumulated: the plane tree on which was attached a marble plate documenting the creation of the cultural association in 1995²⁵ and a small shrine. Opposite the musicians and in front of the former house of culture²⁶ were two terraces divided by a fence. It was affirmed

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that on the upper terrace were sitting the old-established families of Dhoksat, like that of the singer Vasil Çuçi. ‘Outsiders,’²⁷ like a group from Lazarat who came to the feast late, were positioned at the edge of the demarcated space of the feast at improvised square plastic tables (as opposed to the long wooden tables of the villagers) below the impressive steps of the former house of culture. These stairs were also the favoured place for the local youth for observing the feast. Assigning specific places to locals, ‘newcomers’ and ‘outsiders’ and to musicians, dancers and the audience had in this case multiple social meanings, which were understood and respected by the participants of the feast.

MUSIC-MAKING AS A SOCIAL ACT

Music-making and dancing are acts in which the social order is revealed, contested and negotiated. Sugarman wrote that Prespa Albanians at weddings ‘from their gestures and postures to the ways they sing and danced’ give an ‘overwhelming impression of social and moral order’ (Sugarman 1997, 212), an order which she came to understand as a system in process. Similarly, Lortat-Jacob (1994) came to the conclusion that Sardinian circle dances are ‘formally and aesthetically institutionalized’ (Lortat-Jacob 1994, 76) in the sense that their degree of variation and variability is limited. Panopoulos in his study of improvised singing in Aegean Greece confirmed that in villages of Naxos singing is still used in constructive ways ‘which are connected to the constitution of local attitudes, practices, and beliefs concerning gender, community and identity’ (Panopoulos 1996, 53). Music-making and dancing relates also to the double-sided character of the feast as being ordered and improvised at the same time. Maintaining the informality of improvised singing in this context has been interpreted as cultural response to the transformations inside and outside the feasts, even as an act of resistance to its ‘folklorization’ (Panopoulos 2003). Singing is seen by Panopoulos (2005, 250) as a subordinate discourse allowing the construction of an alternative version of local identity based on shared values, symbolic practices and a particular kind of sociability.

But singing and dancing at a feast in South Albania means also



to behave within a system of rules which is related to the concept of honour (*nder*).²⁸ To create a 'community in honour' (Sugarman 1997, 213) requires acting with self-restraint but also fulfilling the expectations of others on how to act. A similar 'body of moral, social, and aesthetic rules' defined locally, was examined at Olymbos feasts (*glen-dia*) in Greece (Caraveli 1985, 263). In this case even the locals themselves considered their feast a ritual (*ierotelesteia*) (Caraveli 1985, 262), stressing the restrictive character of the feast in regard to (social) order and discipline. Even the *juerga* (popular feasts) of Andalusian gypsies, which at first sight resemble a joyous tumult, are guided, according to Pasqualino (2008, 203ff), by a form of ritual ordering.

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In this sense music-making during a feast should be understood as a catalyser, a means and indicator for social interaction, not as an accessory to social reality. The feast with its collective implications brings music into being – gives music a social existence in the meaning that it does not 'accompany' social events but shapes and transforms them. Music-making at feasts and commenting on it, is linked intrinsically with the general *muhabet*. A distinction between 'producers-singers' and one group of 'consumer-listeners' in the Western sense do not exist. For us it is therefore important to observe the processes and interactions during the feast, particularly those between verbal communication, music and dance. In a similar way dance and music-making can be understood as tools for the construction of sameness and otherness, negotiated in relation to time and space.²⁹ Both singing and dancing are competitive cultural fields. Especially dance can become a field of concurrence even between friends through the highly symbolic occupation of space for kin groups or families through the throwing of money to the musicians. Being visible or audible in terms of exhibiting oneself as long as possible seems often to be an aim pursued by dancers and singers/instrumentalists.

As every feast has to reach certain emotional standards, which are described locally as *qeffi* or *gëzim* (joy), music fulfils a crucial role in attaining this heightened state of mind. *Qeffi* or *kefi* as it is called in Greece is a matter of collective interest, achieved through the well-matching of verbal expression and individual sensitivities (Panopoulos 1996, 62).³⁰ Three basic roles of music may be distinguished in

this context: (1) it serves as a regulation system, (2) it is the object of (emotional) mobilisation and it serves as a (3) symbolic communication system by means of which cultural identity is built (Lortat-Jacob 1994, 15). Its purpose is above all a social one: to share emotions, collectivity and memories.

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Singing itself resembles the elaboration of a sketch, a musical form which waits to be turned into aesthetic and emotional experience through performance (Lortat-Jacob 2008). Important in every case is the play between collective and individual initiative, guiding both the singing process and the feast as a whole. This interplay is aimed at evoking emotions not only between singers and listeners but also between the performers themselves. Only through shared emotions is received a concord, which includes both a social and an aesthetic dimension. This concord seems to be a precondition for a ‘good song’ as valued by performers and listeners alike (Lortat-Jacob 2008).

Despite this there are noticeable differences between performers of vocal and of instrumental music. While the former are mostly non-professional, the instrumentalists are often professionals – seen as outsiders in the sense of coming from an urban background or having become ‘urbanized.’ It is because of this distinction made by the villagers that multipart singers are not paid, while the singer of the professional *saze* group is paid. It is the ‘logic of the stage’ which is applied here: the one who enters the stage has the right to get paid, the one who acts from within the social group sings for his own pleasure and the pleasure of the others. This staging of music has been introduced in South Albanian feasts in a more or less visible manner. In Dhoksat, for example, there existed no real stage³¹ but a symbolically charged place near the plane tree (*rrapi*), marked by the marble plate of the cultural association and a shrine. This symbolic stage led to the division between musicians and audience acquiring a more fragile and temporary meaning, as did the circle of concrete, which, although not elevated like a ‘proper stage,’ served as a stage for the dancers.

SITTING, SPEAKING, SINGING AND THE LOCAL
CONCEPT OF ORDER (RADHË)

As the *mubabet* follows distinct patterns, singing and music-making as metaphorical extensions of verbal speech follow comparable structures.



These structures are not fixed but are negotiated in the very moment of the feast. The social context which allows singing and music-making is that of male company displaying and confirming friendship through the sharing of food and drink and the sharing of words. It has been argued that this concept of voluntary friendship is perceived as opposed to that of kinship which is interpreted in terms of obligation and commitment (Panopoulos 1996, 62).

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In fact also singing can become, according to the circumstances, an obligatory socializing activity which serves the meeting of social expectations. Speaking and singing maintain a reciprocal relationship and are considered locally as outcomes of one another: to produce a *bejte* (improvised verse) may be the beginning of a song, or a verbal appendix to it, a *dolli* (drinking toast) can similarly announce a song, interrupt the order of singing or comment on it. Speaking and singing are two alternative ways of commenting the feast and its participants, like the improvised *mantinades* verses sung or spoken at a Greek feast (*glendi*) (Caraveli 1985) or the Sardinian verses exchanged at a poetic game (*gara poetica*) in the mountains of Barbagia (Lortat-Jacob 1994, 68–69).

To understand the local ordering and valuation of singing, one has to grasp the moral and social regulations that guide the sitting order at the table and the verbal discourse as a pre-condition of singing. One particular tradition in which social order becomes prominently visible is the toasting (*dollia*) often accompanied or interrupted by spontaneous singing.

The way *dollia* is organized varies according to the kind of festivity. For example, toasting at a wedding ceremony is not the same as during an engagement. Fiqirete S. from Sulova distinguishes between the huge number of participants at a wedding, where the notion of order is more difficult to apply than in the smaller social circle of an engagement. At a wedding there exists some freedom within a framework of basic rules which are to be followed: the main actors, namely the bride and groom, the father of the bride and her mother, and the best man (*krushku i parë*) have their specified places. But the remaining guests may sit down according to their friendship or kinship links and are always free to choose with the assistance of the 'head of the house' (*zoti i shtëpisë*) a place where they feel comfortable. This means that during the wedding

they can move from one table to the other and change their sitting and singing place.

[178] In another wedding of a couple from Zagoria in the town of Gjirokastra we could observe the same phenomenon: there exists a general sitting order.³² This sitting order influences indirectly the regulation of singing practice. Consequently, three different groups gathered around one table practicing their distinct regional singing styles from the villages of Sheper, Picar or Derviçan. But these singing circles were not completely closed; they were open for people from other tables who might be in the mood to join them spontaneously. The local expression to make space for outsiders is 'hape muhabetin' (open the muhabet). It was no coincidence that the table of Sheper was the most active singing table: it was this kin and local group whose bride was being married. They should therefore be the most joyful group, whose aim should be to meet the highest emotional standards through singing and sharing of joy (*gëzim*). All groups of singers and the professional instrumental ensemble co-ordinated their activities in a striking manner in order to achieve a good alternation instead of a competition between different soundscapes.

An engagement ceremony is in many respects more formal. In the case of Sulova the table is divided into two. On one side sits the host family (for example the family of the future bride), on the other side of the table sits the guest family (the family of the future groom). There is a strict order in sitting within each group.³³ The women sit at the end of the table, the reasoning being that for a man to have a woman beside him means that he has no one with whom to communicate in toasting. The women can not make a toast or be *dollibash* (prime of the toasting). Toasting, singing and discussion is organized around the male space.

Toasting itself is a form of social communication like singing, and both activities are combined. In case a person is supposed or wishes to toast, he has to find a male with whom to communicate and clink together his glass of *rakia*. In an engagement there are two *dollia*. One is the *dollia* of the host family and the second the reciprocating *dollia* of the guest family. *Dollia* is composed of many wishes for health (*shëndete*). Each adult male at the table should be greeted. One greeting can be



short (*shëndet i shkurtër*) which means that one person is greeted once and for all. But the ‘true greeting’ is long. That means that each person should be respected through a number of greetings.³⁴ After finishing with the first representative, the *dollia* continues to the second male, the third male and so on according to their sitting order. In Sulova it is said ‘The true long *dollia* is an introduction of people to each other’. At the very end of the first *dollia*, the *dollibash* asks whether there is anyone left. In case not, the last greeting is for the whole group of in-laws as a unit. After the first *dollia* has finished, the meat is served.³⁵

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Singing follows this pre-established social order. At engagement ceremonies there is no singing before the father of the bride has formally opened the meal. The first to sing are the main representatives of the host family. Afterwards, singing can follow less strict rules. But still it remains important that: (1) no one can sing or even speak publicly without the permission of the head of *dollia*,³⁶ and that (2) there should be a balance in singing between both groups. This is the purpose behind asking permission to sing as well as to speak. The best way to share the singing among both groups is for the uncle of the bride to sing, but only to sing two verses. The corresponding uncle of the groom repeats these two verses after the first stops. The following verses follow the same pattern. This way of balancing participation can take place for everyone who wishes to sing. Whoever does not know these rules cannot participate in social exchange.

SOUNDSCAPES IN SOUTH ALBANIAN FEASTS:
COEXISTENCE OR CONTEST?

Using the concept of soundscape for the analysis of Albanian feasts means to set sound and everyday lived social experience into direct relation. American ethnomusicologist Steven Feld introduced in his influential collections ‘Music of the Kaluli’ (1982) and ‘Voices of the rainforest’ (1991) this notion of an ‘active social listening’ in anthropological research. For him sound meant not the isolation of ethnomusicological ‘pure’ material, and therefore the division of ‘music’ from surrounding ‘noise,’ but rather the contextualization of musical sounds in terms of their human and natural environment, demarcating a specific space (Feld and Brenneis 2004, 465). Focusing on ‘soundscape’ or

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a 'sonic ecology' therefore means contextualizing sound. Soundscapes function according to Feld and Brenneis (2004) not as unilateral phenomena but primarily in a dialogical and multilayered manner, which may include historically formed relationships between them. Soundscapes can be seen in this sense not only as an acoustic indicator of social relations but also as a barometer for clashes in performance, such as between the verbal and the musical sphere or between urban/professional versus rural/amateur musical practice. The concept of soundscapes was applied successfully to the Balkans first among Roma music in Greek Macedonia (Blau, Keil, Keil, and Feld 2002; Feld 2002) then to the animal bells on Naxos, Greece (Panopoulos 2003). All attempts at highlighting the soundscape as a social indicator must be seen as a strategy to break the text-dominated discourse in anthropology, favouring an anthropology of experience (Turner and Bruner 1983) alternatively termed anthropology of the senses or anthropology of performance (Turner 1986).

Approaching an Albanian feast means approaching such a soundscape which may consist of different sonic events occurring at the same time, alternating or contesting each other. These soundscapes are directly related to the temporal and spatial experience of the feast. The alternation between different soundscapes, silence and social action follows a temporal structuring. This time is conceptualized as 'musical time' and 'social time offered to the senses and directed at the affects' (Lortat-Jacob 2008). To analyze the interaction between the social sphere and the musical sphere it is crucial to observe carefully the moments immediately before and after a performance, not necessarily the performance itself. In doing so it becomes clear that singing can be initiated by means of social discourse, such as *muhabet* or by social acts such as *dollia*. Starting to sing is interpreted as a (social) sign related to certain expectations, while the end of every performance is commented in terms of a constructed local, social and aesthetic order. Most visible is the 'timing' of sounds in the alternation of different soundscapes following flexible structural principles. In addition, each soundscape possesses a certain spatial dimension. Sound demarcates space, particularly the space of the village.

As may have become apparent above, the relation between sound-



scapes, mainly between the instrumental and the vocal soundscape, has been transformed and distorted since the introduction of amplification. The self-regulation of the contrasting soundscapes of *saze* ensemble and multipart song through the economic means of each family has been broken. While the hiring of a *saze* for a feast was a privilege of established urban families able to pay the immense costs into the 1950s, today almost no feast goes without instrumental music.³⁷ This means in effect that the vocal soundscape with which the local social community accompanied its own social events has been displaced gradually by an instrumental soundscape.³⁸ If listening today to ‘musical time’ in South Albanian villages, one should keep in mind that this musical order (*radbë*) is an artificial product, related predominantly to the process of amplification favouring instrumental music over vocal practices.

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Creating a soundscape through singing is a conscious act. Singing serves as a tool to display masculinity and to gain public prestige and honour (*nder*) (Sugarman 1997). In addition, the regional style (i. e. Lunxhot style) is considered distinct,³⁹ and is interpreted as proof for the ‘autochthony’ (*autoktonia*) and particularity of a regional society in general. Locals are therefore highly sensitive towards any contestation of their singing, for which they have constructed an unambiguous ownership related to claims of antiquity and uniqueness. The concept of the ‘man from Lunxhëri’ (*burrë lunxhi*) circumscribed in terms such as intelligence, cultivated behaviour and seriousness is expressed acoustically through singing. It is argued that Lunxhots demonstrate their values through singing without exaggerated gestures or the intention ‘to provoke’ (‘çirret’) each other (Dedi and Koci 2006, 45). Contesting the song in consequence means also contesting the social role associated with it.

As in other cases, the feast in Dhoksat followed a progression from a more formal towards an informal character, leading to a heightened state of mind among the participants and to an intensification of social communication. Despite this progression, the dancing order set up by the commission, the spatial order and the musical order (favouring *saze* over multipart singing) was never abandoned. While singing was considered generally as being an ‘insider’ musical practice, the playing of

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the *saze* ensemble of Jorgo Naçi, born in Dhoksat but living in Tirana today, assumed an ambiguous position between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ roles. Roughly one hour after the beginning of the feast, singing started within an already more relaxed atmosphere from the table where the local dignitaries were positioned. It was obviously a family singing, led by the mother of the household. This singing, as did the following performances, took place in the sonic shade of the amplified *saze* ensemble, which did not leave space and time for the locals to sing. Another family, the Bllaci, positioned on the lower terrace of tables, took the initiative to use the scarce breaks that the musicians took ‘because they did not have enough fuel’ (‘pse nuk kanë naftë’). There was no sign of co-ordination between the scarcely intonated singing at the tables and the singer of the *saze*, who announced the order of songs and dances through his microphone. Only at the very end of the feast, around 02.15 in the morning, did the *saze* singer comment to the singers: ‘just two dances and then you can sing yourself.’ It took more than two hours until someone invited one of the most respected and acclaimed singers of the village, Vasil Çuçi, to sing instead of dance. He refused initially, remarking that instrumental music and singing would not go well together this night. Finally, the most active singer of the Bllaci family entered the upper terrace and joined the Çuçi family table to sing ‘old Lunxhot songs.’ At the same time another group positioned at the edge of the feast between the stairs of the house of culture and the upper terrace started singing. This group consisted of young and middle aged men from several neighbouring villages⁴⁰ and from the villages of Golem and Lazarat near Gjirokastra.⁴¹ They were marked as ‘outsiders’ in many respects: from an aesthetic point of view because they were not singing in the ‘right’ manner and in a rough, aggressive competitive style, as well as in the spatial sense as coming from another village or even another region (*krabinë*). They were also isolated socially because they refused to accept the social behaviour regulations.⁴² The singing of this group, therefore, took place in spatial and social isolation. This led the group to shift even closer together physically, building a circle in this indifferent, sometimes hostile environment. Although this group did not in fact consist predominantly of people from Lazarat, they were immediately stigmatized as ‘strangers



singing *for Lazarat* ('të huajtë që këndojnë për Lazaratin') and juxtaposed to the group of elderly singers perceiving themselves as singing for Dhoksat and local pride. The musical outcome of this contest was a competitive soundscape between *saze* and the vocal insider and outsider groups.⁴³ This state of disorder was seen by the older singers not only as an aesthetic disaster but also as a personal insult. When the 'outsiders' then disturbed the *radhë* of the dance, hindering the dancing line of a local family, the situation escalated. Verbal arguments turned into physical arguments – the social and musical order – the harmony of the feast as a whole stood in question. Even the *saze* ensemble stopped playing at this decisive moment. After the expulsion of a few of the lead troublemakers, the worst was over. The local community tried to reintegrate the 'outsiders' into the feast. In the end, the first singer of the 'Lazarat group' was even allowed to dance as the first in the line. In Dhoksat we could witness reconciliation instead of confrontation in moments when the social and musical order became contested. This example verifies that order may be the subject of negotiation or even attack, but it may be re-adapted to the circumstances in a flexible and successful way.

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CONCLUSION

South Albanian village feasts are socially and symbolically charged events. In local imagination each feast requires external and internal structuring, which relates to a social order that should be understood as a system in process, widely agreed upon and at the same time continuously contested. External structuring is achieved through fixing the feast in relation to time and space. Internal structuring is achieved through an ordering of sitting, speaking and singing, and an ordering of events. This structuring is carried out formally or informally by representatives of the village, but is also practiced unconsciously as a set of inherited rules. Verbal discourse (*muhabet*) is directed through drinking toasts (*dollia*). Music, as an extension of this discourse, follows similar patterns: singing and toasting as two forms of codified communication, for example, regulate the power relationships at the table and the feast. Music-making contributes significantly to the structuring of the feasts: the selecting of and commenting on songs and dances

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bears different social and symbolic meanings and constitutes a significant part of the *muhabet* itself. Despite these attempts at structuring, every feast's structure is a mere framework for social orientation within which variations are possible. Social and musical improvisation during feasts is often understood not as breaking the rules of the feast, but as enforcing them. The formal, organized sphere of the feast and the improvised, playful aspects of it are therefore in continuous interaction with each other. Each feast has its own dynamic in the social and musical sense.

Local imagination relates feasts to the fiction of an ideal village with an ideal social order which may be reflected in the soundscapes of the event. Despite this idealistic view each feast witnesses processes of inclusion and exclusion among its participants. It is a place in which strategies of 'othering' are practiced. This 'othering' refers not only to individuals but also to the village as a whole, differentiating itself from the outside world in religious, social and cultural terms. Especially the juxtaposition of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is situation dependent and may even include the possibility of integrating 'outsiders' into a feast setting. Such 'outsiders' may be welcomed as contributing to the joyful mood (*qejf*) and to the prestige of the feast. A precondition for doing so is that these 'outsiders' respect the framework, and are integrated into the agreed upon order of sitting, dancing and singing. They should also conform to idealized local aesthetics and the local singing style. In case this integration fails, as it did in Dhoksat – space, soundscapes and the meaning of the feast itself become contested.

Feasts in contemporary South Albania are shaped to a large degree by the impact of mass migration. Migrants as a community attend feasts massively projecting their particular expectations and nostalgia onto the events. Standing outside of the rural social framework, they tend to idealize their home village as representative of inherited traditions and values as contrasting with their current living situation. For them the feast symbolizes a link between their past and their present. At the same time, migrants as a social group also challenge the institution of the feast, stimulating discourses about the structure and the aesthetic features embodied in the celebration.



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NOTES

- 1 *Bajram*, from the Turkish meaning feast, is celebrated by Sunni and Bektashi Muslims in Albania.
- 2 We refer here particularly to the following feasts: an Orthodox feast Saint Mary in Dhoksat, Lunxhëria 15 August 2008, a Zagorian wedding in Gjirokastra, 16 August 2008, a Bektashi feast at Krëshova, Përmet 17 August 2008, the Bektashi feast of Baba Tomorr, Skrapari 21–22 August 2008, Orthodox feast of Saint Mary Selta, Shpati, Elbasan 28 August 2008.
- 3 For example, in Dhoksat the members of the kin of *Medi* are even today remembered as having settled later on in the village and that they are of *vllab* [Aromanian] origin.
- 4 Celebrated in Saraqinisht and Dhoksat on 15 August.
- 5 This argument, referring primarily to culture and which is primary for our study, contrasts with Zojzi (1962), who – based on linguistic markers – locates the border between Labëria and Toskëria on the Vjosa River.
- 6 Documents show that in the 14th–15th centuries the region of Shpati was much larger than it is today. These borders seem to have been valid until the second half of the 19th century, at which time other groups of villages such as Vërça, Sulova and Dumreja were defined as being part of the region of Shpati (Tirta 1987, 11).
- 7 Selta and Pashtresh celebrate Shmrinë [Saint Mary's], Gjinar celebrates Shmrenën [Saint Marina's], Zavalina celebrates Shëndëllinë [Saint Elias].
- 8 The kin of *Mufalak* celebrate Saint Mihail [Shën Mhillin], the kin of *Dedaj* celebrate Saint George [Shën Gjergjin] and the kin of *Karaj* celebrated Saint Nicolas [Shën Kollin].
- 9 We use the term 'village' here, conscious of its nature as a culturally constructed category.
- 10 In the villages under consideration the term 'kindred group' is used to designate a number of nuclear families with a common remembered ancestor. In terms of a patrilineal descent, these families share the same

surname and are supposed to maintain contact with each other. The local term in such a case may be *familje* (family), *fis* (kin) or *rrënje* (root).

11 For example in Gjinar in Shpati exists a quarter called *Mufalak* where families with this surname settled.

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12 Regarding marriage and engagement ceremonies, the second half of August is considered 'ters' (vicious); therefore few ceremonies are organized in this period. For all villages under consideration the month of August is associated with the returning of the migrants. Marriages do tend to be organized during this month, while the village feasts celebrated in August (and also at Christmas) seem to have gained more significance for the community than other dates throughout the rest of the year. The fixation on August as a central month of the year is also expressed through the belief that each day of August mirrors the months of the forthcoming year, e. g. in terms of a weather forecast.

13 The same two months are preferred as feasting months in other Mediterranean countries such as Morocco (Lortat-Jacob 1994, 21).

14 Including villagers now living in the nearby town of Gjirokastra.

15 Exemplarily here was the composition of one multipart group incorporating singers from Erind, Valare, Golem and Lazarat.

16 A comparative case of such a trans-regional feast is Shëndëllia [Saint Elias] in Zavalina, Shpati. The unique case of the Bektashi feast of Baba Aliu on Mount Tomorr has assumed a role as a collective pilgrimage of trans-regional, national and even trans-national scope.

17 According to recent sources, the rural population of Albania fell by 15% between 1989–2001, as a result of internal and external migration (Carletto et al. 2004).

18 This became obvious in local interpretations of the feast of Saint Mary in Dhoksat, which was seen also as a 'meeting of generations' (takimi i brezave).

19 Panopoulos (1996, 66–67) in the case of singers from Naxos, made clear that these processes are understood by traditional musicians themselves in terms of a decontextualization and/or transformation of their musical practice. For them the notion of what is 'locally representative' remains an important tool for distinguishing what is 'in context' and what is 'out-of-context.'

20 In a similar manner the chapel of Nezhan nearby was financed by a local who had won a lottery in Greece.

21 The old church of Dhoksat destroyed in 1967 was dedicated to Shën



- Premte [Saint Paraskevi]; in 2001 the main celebration of Saint Mary's in Lunxhëria took place in Saraqinisht, whose main church is dedicated to Saint Mary (Gilles de Rapper, personal communication).
- 22 Quite different was the situation in Kreshova, a Bektashi village. Here a day was chosen and accepted for a village feast that had no religious or historical relevance. The villagers choose 17 August with the justification that in August the migrants may come and join the feast. [187]
- 23 The square by the plane tree as well as the marble plate were only constructed in 2007; in northern Greece the plane tree (*platanos*) assumes the same role at local feasts for Saints (*panyiri*).
- 24 The laptop and set of speakers were set up inside this space.
- 25 With the inscription 'Në këtë vend më 8. november 1995 u Krijua Shoqata Athetarekulturore "Lunxhëria"' ['At this place was created on 8 November 1995 the Cultural Patriotic Association "Lunxhëria"'].
- 26 Built where the main church of Saint Paraskevi of Dhoksat stood before 1967 (Gilles de Rapper, personal communication). The building served as a bar and foods stand on the day of the feast.
- 27 In the sense of coming from out of the village which may be as close as another village from the same region.
- 28 For example, in Mallakstra, Labëria and Sulova the conditions for a man to participate in *muhabet* at the table are: 1. to be able to drink but not to lose control easily; 2. to be able to follow and to keep up the course of discussion and 3. to know how to sing with others. The individuals who are best able to do so have the best chances to be chosen as the head of the table or *dollibash*.
- 29 As Zografou (2007) has shown in her analysis of Pontian dance performances, cultural practice even permits to construct 'Sameness' and 'Otherness' in relation to the surrounding population through the same cultural object.
- 30 Panopoulos (1996, 63) mentions in the case of improvised singing in feasts on Naxos, Greece the local expression: 'Mono ama tairiaxei ginetai kalo glendi' (Only if it matches well, can a good *glendi* happen).
- 31 Although within the Lunxhiot house there existed the tradition of an elevated stage for instrumental music (*dhiolixhive*) (see Dedi and Koçi 2006, 29), it has no tradition in open spaces; the circular form of the 'stage' in Dhoksat refers to the traditional *lëmi* (threshing places) of each household, which were used for dancing during feasts and weddings. They are positioned on the same ground level.

- 32 In this case according to kin association and village association (Sheper, Picar, Derviçan).
- 33 On the side of the bride: closest sit the uncles (*daja*, mother's brother and *xhaja*, father's brother). These places are called 'e ulur në qoshe' ('sitting at the corner:' meaning at the head table). The third is the father of the girl, who is also 'head of the house' (*zoti i shtëpisë*) but he is not the 'head of the engagement ceremony' (*zoti i trapezës*). The same structure is found among the representatives of the other side. Then the order of sitting continues respectively, depending firstly on relatedness with the bride or groom, but also on the age of the participant. In such secondary places there can be changes in the order of sitting: those who are older may be respected by those who have a closer relationship with the bride and groom and be allowed to sit closer to the centre of the table. This is called 'retreat from order' ('lëshoj rradhën').
- 34 If a male is greeted, also his mother and father, then his wife, his children and at the end his home in total have to be greeted. All this completes a 'true greeting.'
- 35 Up to this moment only small dishes and *meze* are served.
- 36 When *dollia* is to be made by the opposite side and the power of the table depends upon the head of the guest group, permission should be taken by the latter.
- 37 Dancing in Lunxhëria, for example, was traditionally accompanied by multipart singing predominantly of women (*valle të kënduara*), while instrumental accompaniment had remained a marginal phenomenon until the 1950s.
- 38 Private wedding videos confirm that up to the beginning of the 1990s some ritual parts of the wedding were still accompanied by multipart songs (Guçe 1994).
- 39 Although local discourse and Shituni (1989, 190–1) use the vaguely defined term 'style' for these particularities, it might be better to speak of 'variants' of the general mode of Lab multipart singing.
- 40 Particularly Valare and Erind; It is important to note that both villages were part of the same state farm with Dhoksat at the end of the 1980s (Gilles de Rapper, personal communication).
- 41 Erind, Golem and Lazarat are Muslim villages. Its inhabitants are referred to as Labs. The presence of people from Golem and Lazarat at the feast can also be understood from the perspective that some families living in Dhoksat originate from these villages, settling there



- in the 1970s and 1980s (Gilles de Rapper, personal communication).
- 42 In regard to the dressing code – wearing Chelsea football shirts instead of festive summer dress; in regard of measurement in eating and drinking: they were considered as drunkards; Amstel cans were towering up below their table.
- 43 This competitive aspect between vocal and instrumental soundscape, which may be termed also ‘polymusic’, is restricted neither to the occasion of a feast nor to the geographical space of South Albania. Bonini Baraldi witnessed during burial ceremonies in Transylvania a similar contestation of soundspace between an instrumental ensemble and weeping women (Bonini Baraldi 2005).

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