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Olive tree as a way of life in the Albanian Riviera

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Abstract

The olive tree has a long historical tradition in Albania and is central to everyday life, particularly in the Albanian Riviera and in the southern region of the country. The tree is even believed to be sacred. This paper explores the centrality of the olive tree, its origins, multiple functions and symbolism in the Albanian Riviera. Through observation in the countryside of the Albanian Riviera and in-depth interviews with the local community, this paper provides insights regarding the various approaches towards the olive tree in the current dynamics of the Albania Riviera in terms of: symbolism, handcrafting and DIY, multi-functioning and landscape and, architecture. The research demonstrates that the status of the olive tree as sacred is transmitted orally from a generation to another as part of the cultural heritage elements including traditions, customs, values and norms. In addition, olives serve many functions in the everyday life of communities in the Albanian Riviera, from nourishment to health and beauty. Moreover, the olive tree is embedded in architecture and landscapes from home gardens to graveyards and churches. Handcrafts and furniture made of olive tree is becoming rare due to the difficulty of working with the wood. The research shows that given the centrality of the olive tree in the everyday life of the Albanian Riviera, it is necessary to develop appropriate protection practices and enrich the cultivation of the olive tree.

Research background

Albania is a Mediterranean country where the olive tree is thought to have originated. For more than 3,000 years olives and olive oil have been the most celebrated food products in the Mediterranean basin. Furthermore, they represent a traditionally valued source of healthy nourishment (Mehmet, Hyka, Jorgji & Postoli, 2001). The olive tree represents one of the most common trees in Albania. It is principally used to produce oil and other related nourishment and it covers an estimated 8% of the land in Albania. As shown in Pic. 1, the Albanian olive production zone covers the entire coast from Saranda (South) to Shkodra (North) and inland river valleys in the districts of Peqin/Elbasan, Berat/Skrapar, and Tepelene/Permet (USAID, 2012). In this sense, the entire country can identify traditional and cultural as well as

natural links to the olive tree. In addition, the olive tree is important in economic terms as the olive and olive oil sector represents an important segment of the agro-business and production in Albania. Considering the deep economic reforms to move from a centralised economy to a free market economy, trade liberalisation and European Union integration processes, the olive and olive oil sector in Albania have undergone significant structural transformations. These transformations of the olive sector can also be interlinked with other social phenomena such as migration, urbanisation, property issues, construction and environmental degradation. According to a study on the olive sector in Albania, the number of planted trees is nearly 5 million and is rapidly increasing as a response to sustained demand, good prices and government subsidies for



*Fig1 / Olive tree is the main landscape future, unique spacing form colours
source / Erida Curraj*

expanding the production base (Kapaj & Kapaj, 2012: 496). The olive cultivation is a well-established and old practice in Albania. Most of the studies focus on olive cultivation, olive oil production and olives in the national or regional markets, mostly strictly related to economic terms. This paper attempts to look at another aspect of the olive tree in Albania, i.e. the legacy of the olive cultivation as art and the current patterns of the multiple functions of olive trees with a particular focus on the Albanian Riviera.

Research aim and methodology

The aim of this paper is to investigate the mainstreaming of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera as a way of life by looking into the various approaches from nutrient to an inspiration for artists and motivation for architects. The main objectives of the paper are:

- a) to explore the historical background of the olive tree in the Mediterranean basin;
- b) to analyse the centrality of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera in terms of historical tradition and cultural heritage as well as cultivation;
- c) to shed light into the various approaches to the olive tree in the current dynamics of the Albania Riviera in terms of: symbolism, handcrafting and DIY, multi-functioning and landscape and architecture.

This paper adopts a qualitative methodological approach by applying the methods of observation and in-depth interviews as well as secondary resources. The analysis of the historical background of the olive tree in the Mediterranean basin is conducted through desk research

and use of secondary resources such as articles, reports and policy briefs on olive tree cultivation. The centrality of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera is explored through the adaptation of both secondary resources and in-depth interviews. The main secondary resources used are reports by the Ministry of Agriculture, Albanian Olive Association, and the USAID Programme on Rural Development as well as journal articles and studies. In addition, the field work included in-depth interviews with 27 locals in the selected villages and towns in of the Albanian Riviera. What is more, the investigation of the various approaches to the olive tree in the current dynamic of the socio-economic and cultural development of the region is conducted through the observation of the olive trees locations and usage as well as the perspectives and opinions of the locals interviewed for this study.

The fieldwork was conducted in two phases of five weeks: three weeks between the end of April and mid-May 2015 and two weeks in August 2015. The observations were conducted in the Albanian Riviera and included these main locations: Llogara (Dukat), Palace, Dhermi, Himare as seen in Pic 2 below. The sample for the in-depth interviews were 15 locals, 8 women and 7 men, with an average age of 55 and 12 young locals with an average age of 30; 6 young men and 6 young women. The in-depth interviews with young people were conducted in August, which corresponds to the period of summer holidays during which emigrants return to their homes in the Albanian Riviera. The average population in this area is relatively old



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Geographic Distribution of Olive Trees by Districts

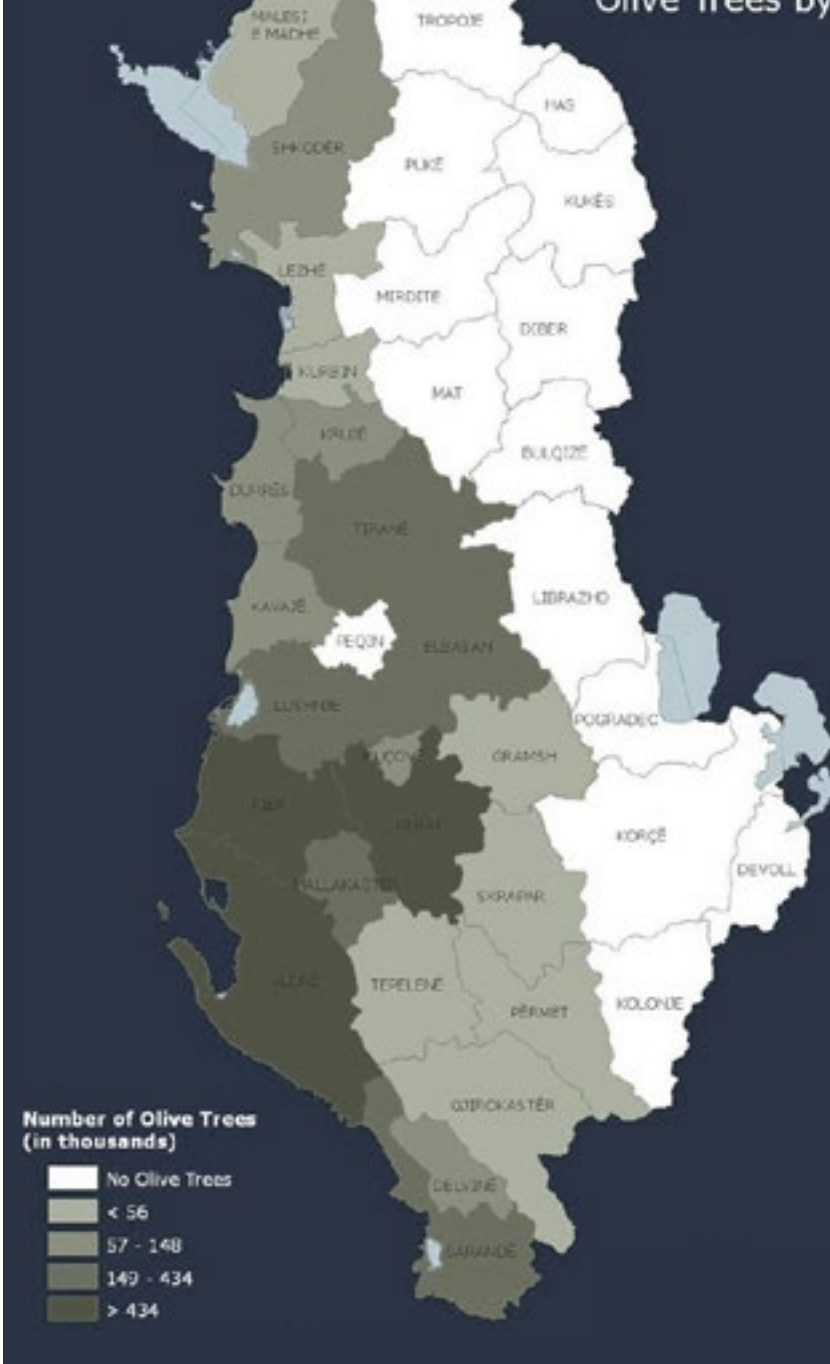


Fig2 / Geographic distribution of olive tree by districts in Albania and Area of the fieldwork
source / USAID

the southwestern Mediterranean (Iberia, northwest Africa) where winters are mild. Recent studies (Besnard, 2013) demonstrate when and where the olive tree was domesticated and how it became the source of today's edible olives and olive oil. The cradle of the first domestication of the olive tree is in the northern Levant (Eastern Mediterranean) followed by dispersals across the Mediterranean basin in parallel with the expansion of civilizations and human exchanges in this part of the world with

the main centre initially located in Greece (Besnard, 2013: 11). Archaeological studies have demonstrated that the olive was established in Greece in the period preceding Minos (3500 BC) (Zohary and Hopf, 2002). This may prove that the wild olive tree has begun during the Palaeolithic or Neolithic ages (5-10 000 BC) (Zohary and Hopf, 2002). During their colonization of the Mediterranean (6th century BC) the Greeks transmitted their culture, their alphabet, their temples and, independently from the Phoenicians, the

and thus the fieldwork was conducted during two time periods. The timeframe for the fieldwork constitutes one of the limitations of the research as well as the lack of quantitative data. However, the focus of this paper is on the exploration of the mainstreaming of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera as a way of life and part of cultural identity rather than the reaching of universal conclusions. Therefore, the qualitative approach through observation, in-depth interviews and secondary resources is appropriate compared to a more quantitative approach.

The observation looks at: the usage of the olive tree in art, handcrafts, landscape and architecture. The in-depth interviews explored the perspectives, knowledge and attitudes of the locals regarding the olive tree. The main elements of the in-depth interviews were: experience with the olive tree; knowledge of the tree's legacy and current development; centrality and symbolism of the olive tree. The analysis of the data gathered through the qualitative study is presented in three main sections as follows: (i) the olive tree in the Mediterranean basin from a historical perspective; (ii) the Albanian Riviera and the centrality of the olive tree; (iii) from a sacred tree to an inspiration for artists and architects.

Origins of the olive tree in the Mediterranean

In the Mediterranean region, the olive tree is deemed as sacred and a symbol of high virtues and goods. Historically for the Mediterranean, olive oil has constituted the main source of nutritional fats, therapeutic ingredients, and has always represented a valuable export product. Therefore, it has become a way of life and part of the Mediterranean identity, i.e. an embedded cultural dimension (Loumou & Giourga, 2003: 89). Also olive tree represents one of the most typical forest species in the Mediterranean region (Zohary and Hopf, 2002). The olive tree belongs to the zone of broadleaf evergreen, also known as the 'olive zone'. The earliest evidence for the domestication of olives comes from the Chalcolithic Period, specifically the archaeological site of Teleilat Ghassul in what is today modern Jordan. Farmers in ancient times believed that olive trees would not grow well if planted more than a certain distance from the sea; Theophrastus gives 300 stadia (55.6 km or 34.5 mi) as the limit. Modern experience does not always confirm this, and, though showing a preference for the coast, they have long been grown further inland in areas with suitable climates, particularly in

cultivation of olive trees (Zohary and Hopf, 2002). However, olives are nowadays cultivated not only in the Mediterranean basin, but also in the Arabian Peninsula, south Asia and parts of China.

Characteristics of olive wood

The olive tree has a long life. It can last centuries, multiplied by a "minjolle", pieces of rows or twigs (Albanian Encyclopaedia, 1985:1134). The growers, who are mainly community based and family-owned, plant the trees and harvest them for table olives or olive oil. Olive trees are evergreens with pale grey bark and gnarled trunks. Their wood can also be used for furniture. The 5-year old olive tree can bear fruit. In the Mediterranean area, two types of olive tree (Voulgaridis, and Passialis, 1995: 8) can be distinguished and both of them can be found in Albania: (i) the wild species (*Olea europaea* var) *oleaster* DC or *Olea europaea* var. *sylvestris*; (ii) cultivable species *Olea europaea* var. Olive trees can reach heights of fifteen to twenty meters, but are usually pruned to only four to five meters (Lipshitz, et.al. 1991: 445). The wood is hard and close-grained, and it is not only suitable for woodworking but is also termite resistant (Lipshitz, et.al. 1991: 445). Production generally starts 5-6 years after planting (Zohary and Hopf, 2002:137). Once established they can bear fruit for decades or even hundred years. Olive wood offers impressive design with close rings, but no smell (Voulgaridis, and Passialis, 1995). In the Mediterranean basin and beyond, the significance of the olive tree rests upon its historical and cultural heritage, its symbols and its economic relevance for the livelihoods of the households. In the following section, the centrality of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera will be explored.

The albanian riviera and the centrality of the olive tree

Olive trees are planted in Albania at a certain distance from the sea, particularly in Saranda, Fieri, Vlora, Lushnja, Berati, Tirane, Kruje, Durrës and Shkoder where winters are mild. Olive trees can withstand some cold: in fact, they need it to a certain extent or they will not produce fruit. They are not, though, trees meant for a real winter. Cultivated at 200-300 m above the sea but, in some places, it grows also at 600 m above the sea. The Albanian Riviera lies along the Ionian Sea; it starts at the foot of Ceraunian Mountain and ends at the Lukova seaside. In 1944 1.5 million olive trees were counted. The first enterprises are located in Vlore close to the Albanian Riviera. In 1983



Fig3 / How different churches in Albania Riviera have their similar landscape, whiteness of the walls is a peaceful background of the contrast of greens, olive tree and dark cypress's leaf / source Erida Curraj

5.27 million olive tree covering 2327 ha were counted (Albanian Encyclopaedia, 1985: 1134). During this period, large olive plantations were established in the Albanian Riviera. During the privatization of farmland in 1991 and 1992, 45,000 hectares of olive groves were distributed to 110,000 households, resulting in a highly fragmented olive production. Although historically considered to be sacred and well protected by laws, olive plantations suffered massive destruction caused by civil unrests in the early 1990's and the number of trees decreased to 3.5 million by 1996 (Mehmet and Postoli, 2001). In 2000–2006 the annual number of new trees planted increased from 86,000 to 235,000. 8 from the 9 most commonly grown varieties are native to Albania (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection).

The olive tree blossoms at the beginning of summer and its fruit ripen about the time of the early rains in October. The fruit, which is rich in oil, is first green, but later becomes black. Modern landscape architecture is using the green-grey and white flowers of olive tree as a contrast of colours. The tree is full of beauty and, during spring, the olive tree is covered with many small whitish flowers, especially when laden with fruit. Olive images are found on ancient Greek vases, Etruscan friezes, impressionist paintings and modern textiles. Finally, the combination of decorative surfaces and turners led to the construction of integrated and highly attractive small furniture, which not only can utilize olive wood, but also feature it (Lipshitz, et.al. 1991: 450).

Olive trees grow in any light soil, even on clay if well drained, but in rich soils they are predisposed to disease and produce a lower quality oil than in poorer soil. Consequently the rocky ground needed to enrich with new layer and then to mix until a necessary deep suitable for the roots. As a result of this process, cultivating olive tree represented a challenge, not many families could follow the dream to have olive tree. According to one of the interviewees, only the strong families could. Due to this hard work not many families could support to achieve expanding their territory. Most well-known families were – Dunaj, Gjikopulos (Kumi, 2015, Dhermi). According to one of the interviewees: "olive oil was a good reason to be or not to be – the main existence of the area". This implies the centrality of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera. In this sense, certain olive trees in Elbasan and Berat are considered as natural monuments such as the 'Olive of pleasure' (Ulliri i Qejfit) in Elbasan situated in the olive grove of the city whereby residents go to relax or the Droboniku Olive Tree in Berat.

Symbolism of the olive tree as a sacred tree

The olive tree has held a special place in human culture for 8000 years. Ancient Greeks crowned the victors of Olympic Games with wreaths of olive branches. The Romans used them in rites. To Romans, the olive tree did not have as much symbolical meaning, although according to the legend, Romulo and Remo, founders of Rome and descendants

of Gods, saw the first light under the branches of an olive tree (Monteiro, 2013). In the Hebrew and Christian religions, the olive branch has always symbolized peace and brotherhood. Two such olive branches at the side of the candelabrum symbolize the State of Israel, because "an olive leaf" symbolizes peace (cf. Gen. 8:11). There are also many references to the olive in the Quran: In Surat al-Mu'minun, Allah says "And a tree (olive) that springs forth from Mount Sinai, that grows oil, and (it is a) relish for the eaters" [al-Mu'minun 23:20]. In Ancient Egypt, it was common belief that the creation of olive trees and the knowledge to produce olive oil was a gift from Goddess Isis (Montero 2013). Picasso's image of a dove with an olive branch is the international symbol of peace.

It is proved historically that olive tree is cultivated in Albania since 3-4 century BC and thus its symbolism can be traced in Albanian cultural heritage. Illyrian has a developed culture of planting, growing and cultivation of the Olive tree. The oldest olive trees in Albania region are in Albanian Riviera as seen above. Cutting an olive tree in Albania was prohibited historically as they were considered as sacred. The interviews in the Albanian Riviera demonstrate the existence of many legends about olive tree as sacred: "the prince of Riviera has ordered not to cut neither a branch from the olive tree, and during the night he sent his own horse and killed it meanwhile it was eating some olive tree, an example that was not followed from nobody". Also in the City-State of Sparta, cutting down an Olive tree was punishable by death or exile. Maybe this is one of the reasons that we do not find any witness of ornaments or asset made in olive wood.

During the observations in Albanian Riviera and through the in-depth interviews, one can easily observe the different traditions of the cultivation and multi-functioning of the olive oil. Coffee times are perfect occasions to discover the centrality of the olive tree in this area given that in all in-depth interviews, the olive tree was introduced to the researcher as crucial and always thought as a part of their life.

Another element that demonstrates the status of the olive tree as sacred is the tradition to plant a new olive tree for any new birth. Also, the interviewees confirm that every couple on their wedding day should plant 10 olive tree roots. It is said the same for the north Riviera with the difference to plant 2 olive trees. The tradition mentions that Skanderbeg since

the XV-th century has applied the rule for every couple to plant some olive trees on their wedding day. The interviewees argue that the traditionally only a very rich men could afford to have a grave surrounded by olive tree planks called Stranica from Dukat's habitants. It was believed that this grave would last for a long time due to the strength of the olive tree. These examples demonstrate that the status of olive tree as sacred is transmitted orally from a generation to another as part of the cultural heritage elements such as traditions, customs, values and norms.

Handcrafting and do-it-yourself practices of olive tree

The in-depth interviews show how olive tree has been used in multiple ways in Albania. The interviewees argue that olive oil is used for various maintenance purposes such as to polish or remove water or alcohol spots from a furniture by mixing olive oil and lemon; or if the door hinges shout during nights, the solution is some drops of olive oil on it. Olive tree has also been used as an exchange tool instead of currency. It has also been used to produce various crafts by hand, as precious objects of local Albanian tradition in the Riviera. In this sense, we can argue for the multi-functioning of the olive tree from nourishment to health, to housing and maintenance, to beauty and small ornaments and furniture.

Architecture and landscape

The observation of the landscape and architecture in the Albania Riviera demonstrates that olive tree is widely used in churches and graveyards in addition to cypress, which is the most used tree in the Mediterranean area in churches. In this area, the celebrations of religious rituals are particularly pursued and olive tree constitute a central part of this traditions and practices as shown in the pictures below.

Nano says: "olive wood is very expensive, now days technics can make any wood to look like an olive wood, this wood is hard, needs more time to take a shape consequently the cost is higher". Many churches' icons or their frames are carved from his father in Albanian Riviera, on his 30 years' experience he affirms: "working with olive wood is becoming rare".

Sharp white-grey rocks, green trees, peaceful endless sea make a beautiful scene for the entire artist, this is how the way from Llogara lay down to Palace.

These pictures from the observations in the Albanian Riviera are evidence of the central role of the olive tree in the



Fig4a / Olive tree is the main landscape future, unique spacing form colours
source / Erida Curraj

landscape in south Albanian close to the seaside, but also more inland.

Olive cultivation is an important part of the entire agriculture sector in Albania. The fieldwork shows that the challenges faced in the olive cultivation in the Albanian Riviera are: the small farm size, poor quality of inputs, outdated technology, insufficient post-harvest facilities (Cela et.al., 2010: 59). The Albanian Government has improved the Agricultural Policy framework and the aligned the Albanian legislation to the *acquis communautaire*. The two main strategy documents related to agriculture and rural development are Agriculture and Food Sector Strategy 2007-2013 and Rural Development Crosscutting Strategy for 2007-2013. However, both documents need to be assessed in line with the new National Strategy for Development and Integration 2014-2020.

Regarding the olive cultivation, one of the priorities has been to increase the area planted with olives, for instance not less than 0.4 ha for individual farmers and not less than 1 ha for groups of farmers, comprising 50 % of the project's value, but no more than 3,100 EUR/ha (Cela et.al., 2010: 57). Also, attention is paid to the drip irrigation on olives as well as on establishment of wells for irrigation on olive trees. In addition, European Union support has been received through the Instrument of Pre-Accession for Rural Development (IPARD).

The detailed elaboration of the impact of improvements in the policy framework and the IPARD funds on the olive cultivation would be the focus of an entirely new

research project.

Conclusions

Olive tree is a symbol of civilization and culture all around the Mediterranean area. Dominant element of Mediterranean evergreen hardwoods zone produces two of the most popular products, olive oil and olives. Olive tree, its cultivation, multi-functions and symbolism in the Albanian Riviera, which have transformed the olive tree into a way of life of the Albanians in the Riviera rather than a simple fruit. Drawing from the history of the olive tree in the Mediterranean and its historical and current symbolism, the paper explores the positioning of the olive tree in the Albanian Riviera. The cultivation of olive trees for table olives and olive oil represents one of the major economic activities of various households and small businesses in the Albanian Riviera. Other functions of the olive tree relate to the use of olives and olive oil for health, decorations and beauty matters. In this way, the olive tree has become multi-functioning. What is more it has gained the status of a sacred tree, whose symbolism is inherited from generation to generation via oral history, cultural norms and traditions in the south of Albania.

As far as the potential utilization of olive wood as a raw material for carpentry, this paper reports that crafting olivewood is a rather difficult and time - consuming process mostly due to high density and hardness, but provides unique final products. A combination of decorative panels and curved logs presented by this paper consists a potential utilization of



*Fig4b / Olive tree is the main landscape future, unique spacing form colours
source / Erida Curraj*

olive wood as a raw material for carpentry. However, olive trees are largely used as decorations for landscapes and in architecture such as in home gardens, in hotels and restaurants, public spaces as well as in graveyards and churches. The olive tree is inseparable from the landscape of the Albanian Riviera and from the daily life of households and businesses in this part of the country, but not only. The utilities of the olive oil, its multifunction and symbolism is spread all over Albania, making it one of the most important trees in the country, which deserves particular attention and protection policies from both the government, the private sector and environmental stakeholders.

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