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AUTHOR: *PhD Researcher Joana DHIAMANDI*
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Taking measures regarding the invisible dimension of the landscape

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Joana Dhiamandi
PhD researcher

Abstract

The Albanian landscape is an essential part of the elusive European landscape, intimate, fragmented and apparently culturally pluralistic. The term sublime was applied to the landscape during the conclusion of the 18th century and the 19th century, the time of Romanticism and Greek independence, during which the curiosity for the Orient was overwhelming. Sublime, a word that seems especially appropriate for the Albanian landscape. This landscape possesses profound historical and cultural reasons, archeological echoes of past modes of human existence, which to contemporary eyes are of a widely romantic appeal. This paper is an attempt to examine the invisible matrices of the landscape made by signs, layers, patterns formed in time and space, filled with multisensory information regarding the cultural dimension that the landscape owns.

Landscape on time and image

The 19th century was the golden age of landscape painting in Europe and America. Three aesthetic concepts established during the Romantic era divided the natural world into the categories of Pastoral, Picturesque, and Sublime (Rabb, 2009). The first two represent Nature as a comforting source of physical and spiritual sustenance. As Edmund Burke articulates in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the idea of sublime refers to the thrill and danger of confronting untamed Nature and its overwhelming forces. Views of Albanian Territories' depicted in the picturesque paintings of Lord Byron and French Painter Robert Denham reveal quite a "scenic" and "scopic" aspect of landscape inquiry, bringing to life a unique insight of the natural and multilayered territory. Paintings and now photographs have always been a storytelling machine. Within them, a rare ability of self-expression and creative thinking express the processes of interaction

and mapping ideas. Albania is a multi-patterned territory which has evolved in time. With the implicit and explicit association that "place" is constructed over time, evoking different "ways" of seeing and understanding and underlying, interrelations, they attempt to create different realities. If we refer to Clement (2011) that "landscape is what we see after observing", in the case of the Albanian Riviera it can be quite the opposite, landscape is what we feel without having to see. According to Edward Lear, there is 'luxury and inconvenience, on the one hand, liberty, hard living and filth on the other'. Edward Lear's travels through Albania in 1848 and his "Journal of Landscape Painter" catalogue describe the mysterious and often misunderstood land of Albania.

Sublime as a humbling reminder that humanity is not all-powerful, images of Albanian Landscape like pictures of humankind as a small and impotent point in front of the intimidating mountain



Fig 1 / Palasa and Dhermi, Eduawrdc Lear 1848
source / Edward Lear Journals of a Landscape Painter in Albania, London 1851

of Tomor, in front of the dizzying cliffs and canyons of Osumi River, ferocious animals, and violent storms. The people in paintings are small but proud, stressed in "their dresses (the most magnificent in the world, consisting of a long white kilt, gold worked cloak, crimson velvet gold laced jacket and waistcoat, silver mounted pistols and daggers)" (Lord Byron). These works are uplifting but also deeply spiritualize the unknown and wild territory, a territory changed through the passage of the years where still the same trace can be found on the journey towards the divine. The British poet, Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), set out on a grand tour of the Mediterranean in 1809, visiting Albania in the autumn of that year. The country made a lasting impression on him, reflected in the second canto of the poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," that catapulted him to fame as a writer in 1812. "Land of Albania!" (Byron, 1812) he proclaimed in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage"... "Let me bend mine eyes / On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men! / The cross descends, thy minarets arise, / And the pale crescent sparkles in the glen". Byron uses his undeniable talent to craft an image of a land he held in high esteem, an area that truly was part of the Western imagination, manifesting a rather syncretic character of this region, a fusion of different cultural and spiritual systems, creating a new interactive system. With the fall of the religious practice, Albanian territory lost its ability to be activated by rituals and events of each religious system, in which nature and human were the celebrating elements.

Now, the concept of "measuring" landscape has changed. The contemporary approach, in contrast with the romantic and picturesque approaches of the 18-19th centuries, divides the landscape into categories, space, and nature. "Earth's topography flattens out to a canvas upon which the imagination can inscribe grandiose projects at an imperial scale" (Corner, 1996).

On the legacy of communism

After this romantic perspective of the Albanian Landscape, during the 20th century, the point of view changes. Using its formerly picturesque characters, rocks become symbols of power, water of distance and green of military camouflage. The territory becomes transformed into a language of defenses and shelter for the thousands of bunkers lying on it which turn the landscape into a weapon of war. Because of communism, nationalism led to a refusal of aid from other communist countries, but the influence of the former Soviet Union on ideology and planning models is undeniable. The territory starts being marked by landmarks of power. In a comprehensive context these legacies raise questions about a socialist landscape and aspects of equity, environmental quality, and modernization of the way the scene is conceived as an open space for experimentations while the post-socialist landscape has been characterized by the discontinuity between the different typologies of the landscapes. Large factory complexes and public building facilities remain in the urban landscape. The removal of elements of the built



Fig2 / Mountain scenery, Gulf of Aulon
source / draw by H. W. William

environment and accompanying symbolic forms has been taken to be emblematic of the change of the political and social system from state-socialism to various forms of emerging capitalism.

As Lefebvre (1991) notes, every society produces its own space or landscape, while Levinson (1998: 10) argues that "those with political power within a given society organize public space to convey (and thus teach the public) desired political lessons." Mitchell (2000: 109) develops the link between power and landscapes when he notes that "Landscape[s] are incorporations of power. They are made to represent who has power, but also to reinforce that power by creating a constant and unrelenting symbol of it." Landscapes are thus ideological in Mitchell's (2000) argument. The landscape is therefore an essential ingredient in constructing consent and identity for the projects and desires of powerful social interests" (Mitchell 2000: 100). During communism, the landscape was used as a canvas to express political and ideological expressions. Porto Palermo and its well preserved castle, originally created by the Venetians as star fort triangle in 1662, has the status of Protected Landscape, a landscape that with its communist history, quite overwhelmed by the underwater war facilities, demonstrates the ways in which landscape and its adaptability is the foundation of carrying out both dreams and nightmares, frustrations for a better future and illusory dreams. Porto Palermo Bay, previously hiding inside the submarine station of the Albanian military,

today is a potential that can be used as a secret ingredient for the development of tourism. Massive concrete expansions, huge abandonment actions, could be the keywords that define the transformation of the Albanian Riviera. Similarly, the mountain of Tomor was used as an open canvas for propaganda with the name of the dictator written-Enver and later translated by Armando Lulaj into Never, landscape a space to express a clear statement of freedom. Once again there are several ways of thinking about landscape and time, from landscape archeology to historical geography and heritage conservation.. Whenever there is a WHAT, borrowed cross-cultural items have to be adapted. Otherwise, the new and the old do not match and in some instances the two patterns are completely contradictory. Some aspects of the fixed features of space are not visible until one observes human behavior. Edward Hall in the "Hidden Dimensions" (Hall, 1990) defines spatial experience as not just visual but multisensory. No matter what happens in the world of human beings, it occurs in a spatial setting, and the design of that setting has a deep and persisting influence on the people there. Everyone receives all information about the environment through his or her senses. For example, spatial and functional distribution of the old bazaar in the city of Gjirokastra reveals precisely the cultural division of the social groups in this community. The Christian Orthodox community practices its professional activities in the same building that facilitates its private space. Public and private space are conceived



*Fig3a / Nomad and Myslim tombs and Graves, near Shkodra
source / Giuseppe Massani 1940*



Fig3b / Interior of the ruined church of Vuno / source Eranda Janku



Fig3c / Lukova center / source Eranda Janku

essay on "Fraternal Love" in his *Moralia* (2.490b). He cites the example of the Cretans, who compromised and reconciled their differences and came together in alliance when faced with external dangers. "And that is their so-called Syncretism." (Britanica, topic, religious syncretism)

Traces of the paganistic rituals and spiritual experiences in the Riviera area are partially evident. In the Albanian society, religious practices are very much influenced by the landscape, also affecting religious rites. The fusion of cultures in this region has its origins in the era of Alexander the Great (4th century BC)(Lofflin). His successors, and the Roman Empire tended to bring

together a variety of religious and philosophical views as a strong tendency toward religious syncretism, while the influence of the Ottoman Occupation drafts another cultural layer on this territory.

In the area of Himara and Palasa, the second language for the Drimadhiotes is a vulgar form of Greek. A hypothesis for this is that Himariotes are a Greek minority. Another hypothesis is that Greek was adopted as a working language during Turkish attempts to occupy the place and the Himariotes were forced to flee to the neighboring Greek islands for trading reason especially with the island of Corfu.



Fig4a / Porto Palermo submarine station / source internet
 Fig4b / TXT / source internet

as one system with several functional sub-systems within, differently from the Muslim community which has a strict and clear territorial division of the professional/public and private life. This territorial division is a clear statement of the invisible boundaries which separate culture and its subcultures. The theories regarding the relationship between culture and landscape describes that neither culture nor landscape could exist without the vivid interaction that makes them equally valid to human society.

What would we consider time, motion, culture in the case of landscape? Moreover, which is the influence of culture on nature and the opposite?

Syncretic landscape

Recapitalizing on the words of Lord Byron, we can suppose that the hidden character of the Riviera territory and Albanian landscape is composed of the matrices of different cultural and religious signs marking the landscape. Symbols and rituals reveal a collective memory of the rather blended social and cultural groups of this territory. Thus, the landscape possesses a quite syncretistic character created by combining different, often contradictory beliefs, with various schools of thoughts. Syncretism involves the merger and analogizing of several originally distinct traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion, thus asserting an underlying unity and allowing for an inclusive approach to other faiths. The Greek word –Syncretism – occurs in Plutarch's (1st century AD)

An interesting fact supporting this second hypothesis are the songs, specifically mourning ones, are held in the Albanian language.

Orthodox Christianity, although influenced by other religions, generally looks negatively at claims of syncretism, but in the case of Riviera, syncretism could be connected with contextualization, the practice of making Christianity relevant to a culture. The coexistence of various religious communities creates an especially sacred landscape in the Albanian Riviera. Southern Riviera is a string pocket of the Orthodox community in the religious demographic map of Albania.

As a characteristic example of the syncretic use of the territory as part of the past and present, where landscape is a medium for religious belief, stands the village of Fterë. The villages of Dhermi, Himara and the complex of the villages Vouno, Ai Vasilis, Lukova are t evidence of the Greek Orthodox practice revealing the ways that the landscape has been articulated according to their ritual and practices. The city formation and the use of space are signs that show that "Territoriality is usually defined as behavior by which an organism characteristically lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its species". (Hall, 1990).

The inhabitants of the region are converted Christians since early times. It is reported that Himara had its own Bishop in the IX century. All the autochthonous inhabitants are Greek Orthodox Christians



*Fig5 / Never by Armando Lulaj
source / internet*

while religion practices were observed even in the atheistic period of 1967-1990.

An interesting fact here is that Drimadhes has numerous churches, about 35, one in about 20 families. There are three major monasteries, two big churches, of Saint Harallambi, and Saint Spiridon refurbished in 1967. However, the major part of the villages' churches are small, built mostly by the emigrants returning from abroad. The churches of Saint Stephens and Saint Dimitri, according to the text of the History of Albania contain some of the oldest afrescos of Albania (XII century). Reports of the XVII century give evidence of the efforts of the Catholic Church, through the Basilian order, to convert the Himariotes and especially the Drimadhiotes. The most celebrated religious events are Assumption Day, Christmas, Orthodox Easter and Blessed Water Day. While the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini was famous as the local governing Code in Northern Albania, Himara abides by an unusual variant of the Code called the Kanuni I Papa Zhulit. The contemporary religious practice of Albanians has never strictly adhered to many religious duties and practices. Prohibition of alcohol was never observed by Albanian Muslims, daily prayer was ignored and ritual fasting hardly noted. Of course, they kept the Koran in their house, helped the poor, performed the rites for the dead, and visited the tombs of Muslim holy men. There are numerous accounts of Christians and Muslims visiting the sacred sites of each others' congregations. If we judge by the ex-voto on the walls of shrines, a Christian custom also adopted

by Muslims, miracles are believed as never before. Not only are these practices still observed today, but some religious celebrations are becoming festive occasions for the Albanian family. People in modern-day Albania attend religious ceremonies regardless of which faith they belong to, as a form of social gathering. Therefore, it might be assumed that a common spiritual substratum exists for all four religions in Albania and that a typical Albanian form of religiosity developed (Doja, 2006). On the other hand, Kuzum Baba, is located in the Eastern part of Vlora, about 30 meters above sea level, is a terrace carved out by sea waters, about 200-300 meters long. On top of the hill is the Kuz Baba Tekke, the religious center of the Bektashi sect in the Vlora region.

Bektashi is the mystical order of Islam that probably best exemplifies a transformational pattern involving all theological, ideological, cultural, social, and political aspects. Heterodox religious movements and the institution of new forms of religion, as in the case of mystical orders of Islam like the Bektashis, are decisive for understanding the history of religions, verifying the existence of this particular syncretism system in the Southeast European area. Many have continually portrayed the Bektashi doctrine as pagan, an observation that is not altogether accurate. Bektashi attitudes in this regard can be more correctly defined as being panentheist, a belief that maintains that while everything in existence is an emanation of God (part of God Himself), the Divine is far greater in



Fig6 / Gjirokastra old city / source Joana Dhiamandi



Fig7 / Religious traces on the Landscape / source Eranda Janku

His Reality than His creation; everything is God, but God is not everything.

The religious manifestations do not always show the real political dimension that such a system extends to the social territory. According to Albert Doja, religious conversion and politics, as showed elsewhere, relate primarily to a collective history, which embraces social and cultural communities, or more precisely, members of a lineage, family, a village community or a larger territorial group. Collective representations and beliefs, rites, customs, and ceremonies are considered part of the official religion – Christianity or Islam accordingly – of a given local community or social network, irrespective of whether a particular cultural trait does or does not form part of the world religion in question. They are categorized collectively not as religious features of an established world system but as 'an ancestral legacy of traditions and customs'. Belonging to a religion means belonging to a social group/network, pursuing a collective memory. Although the individual may share group prejudices towards other religious groups, the essential group values are defined by a system of kinship and alliance, of solidarity and hostility, of status and social position, as being common to all Albanians.(Doja, 2006)

An extraordinary example in the role that architecture has played in the religious social and urban structure is the old city of Gjirokastra and, in particular, the Old Bazaar area. The element of symbiosis between Christian orthodox and Muslim

inhabitants is very obvious by simply observing the architectural and functional structure of the houses and shops in the area of the Bazaar. The space organization of the Orthodox merchants allowed them to position their living spaces above their workspaces and shops in comparison to the Muslim merchants who had a separate structure between working and living, positioning their houses away from their shops in the Bazaar, to the more intimate areas of the old city of Gjirokastra.

Invisible pluralism

Landscape influences religion and religion shapes the landscape. Signs, rituals, aetiological myths, theonyms, and epithets, as well as human artifacts are creating a web of ciphers and symbols that make up the sacred landscape of a place, creating the narrative of the sacred landscape. Religion has no evolutionary functions, is rather existential and moral sentiments constitute a cognitive invention. Human manipulation is a process we can recognize in many periods, like Delphi's gradual transformation from a natural sanctuary to an architectural sanctuary. Mountains, rivers, and springs were 'sacralised', and associated with myths, heroes, and deities. The hidden dimension of the landscape is organizational, created by space and different systems of communication, spatial aspects, architecture and city planning. This statement is essential to understanding the cultural landscape. Ruggles (2009) had it right; humans are always striving to find their place in the cosmos. Complex landscape problems call



*Fig8 / Albanian Riviera panorama
source / Joana Dhiamandi*

for a pluralistic and syncretic approach, expanding the range of possibilities for people and places. The creation and re-interpretation of the landscape can become fundamental aspects of people's identity.

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