

## CHAPTER 2

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# People and Plants in Lëpushë Traditional Medicine, Local Foods and Post- communism in a Northern Albanian Village

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### Introduction

This is the story of a village and its surrounding alpine settlements in a very remote, mountainous area in upper Kelmend, northern Albania. This story tells of the people who have remained in this place since the fall of the communist regime in 1991, either because it was so special to them that they did not want to leave, or because they could not find the means to migrate, either legally or illegally, to the United States or Western Europe, as most of the other inhabitants of northern Albania have done. It also tells of how the villagers have managed to provide their own healthcare as they continue living in the mountains, sustained by their cows, pigs, potatoes, cabbages and corn, while facing the dramatic collapse of their national economy and their institutionalized health and transport systems. This is the brief story of their traditional medicine (TM) and local foods, of their interactions with their natural environment where they gather wild plants for food and medicines, and of the gender relations prescribed by these traditional practices. It also tells of the dramatic changes this village has had to face since the end of the communist era. This story, like every story, expresses a personal view: it describes what I myself have observed and reflected on, and is therefore undoubtedly biased by my own subjectivity.

## Albania

Albania is located in the Balkan Peninsula, and bordered by Montenegro and Kosova in the north and northeast, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the east and Greece in the south. To the west are the Adriatic and Ionian seas. The country covers an area of 28,750 km<sup>2</sup> and apart from its flat coastline, is primarily mountainous. Albania's population is younger than that of other European countries, with one third of its 3.1 million inhabitants under the age of fifteen years, and 40 per cent younger than eighteen years (Nuri 2002). A high proportion of Albanians live in rural areas: 58 per cent in 2001 according to the Albanian National Institute of Statistics, INSTAT (quoted in World Bank 2003). However, since restrictions on the freedom of movement were lifted in the 1990s, there has been an unprecedented level of internal migration from rural to urban areas. The population of the capital, Tirana, for example, increased from 250,000 inhabitants in 1990 to an estimated one million in 2005. Many people have also left the country to migrate abroad – between 600,000 and 800,000 depending on various estimates (King and Vullnetari 2003). It appears that this emigration process is not yet slowing down, and large numbers of Albanians are still leaving, both legally and illegally.

About 97 per cent of the Albanian population is ethnic Albanian, 1.9 per cent are Greek, while other groups are represented in small numbers. Islam is the religion of 70 per cent of the population, while 20 per cent are Orthodox Christian, with 10 per cent Roman Catholic. These figures reflect the religion of origin, since at least up until now religion has not generally been a crucial identifying element in Albanian society. Nevertheless, with the return of religious freedom, many mosques and churches that were closed in 1967 have now been reopened, and I have the impression that the issue of religion is becoming increasingly central in building cultural identity, at least in the mountainous, rural areas in the north.

### *Historical Background*

The ancestors of the Albanians, the Illyrians, preserved their own language and culture despite the establishment of Greek colonies in the seventh century BC, and subsequent centuries of Roman rule. Illyria became part of the Byzantine Empire in the division of the Roman Empire of AD 395. Migrating Slavic and Germanic groups invaded the region throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, while various neighbours contested control of the region. In 1344 the country was annexed by Serbia, which in turn was occupied by the Turks in 1389. A national Albanian hero, Skenderbeg, led the resistance opposing the Ottomans; nevertheless in 1479 Albania was finally incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, in which it remained a very poor, rural province for several centuries. Many Albanians at that time

migrated to Southern Italy, where they still live today (approximately 100,000 persons) and they define themselves and are known as Arbëreshë. Nowadays these Arbëreshë have been largely assimilated into South Italian culture, even if a few of them still speak the Albanian language (for a medical anthropological field study, which lasted three years, conducted on the Arbëreshë of northern Lucania, see Pieroni and Quave 2005, 2006).

Albania achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, while Kosova, which made up nearly half of Albania at the time, was transferred to Serbia at the 1913 peace conference. Albania was overrun by successive armies in the First World War and became a kingdom only in 1928, under King Zog I. Italy occupied the country during the Second World War, and King Zog fled to the United Kingdom.

The Albanian Communist Party, founded by Enver Hoxha, led the resistance against first the Italians and then the Germans. In January 1946, the People's Republic of Albania was proclaimed, and Hoxha became its president, remaining in power until his death in 1985. Albania initially followed Soviet-style economic policies, but in 1960/1961 it broke off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and aligned itself with China. In 1978 Albania isolated itself, politically and socially, from the rest of the world. After the collapse of communism in eastern Europe in the early 1990s, the Albanian population staged demonstrations, finally forcing the government to agree to allow opposition parties.

The governing Labour Party, led by Ramiz Alia, won the election in March 1991 after promising to privatize state land. The Democratic Party led by Sali Berisha won the election in March 1992. March 1997 saw the collapse of several pyramid savings schemes, in which perhaps two thirds of the population had invested money, with an estimated loss of \$1,000 million (US). People blamed the government for complicity in the schemes, and widespread violence followed. The country's economic growth rate of the previous four years was reversed, inflation and unemployment rose, and economic recovery was severely curtailed. In the wake of this scandal, Berisha was forced to call new parliamentary elections in June 1997, and he resigned the presidency when the Socialist Party won. Fatos Nano became prime minister, and except for a short period from 1998 to 1999 when Pandeli Majko was appointed prime minister, Nano governed until July 2005, when Berisha was re-elected. The democratization of Albania is a work in progress, however, and if the past elections are any indication, the political processes still do not fully meet international standards (OneWorld 2005).

### *Economy*

Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe. According to the most reliable estimates, the gross national product (GNP) per capita in 1999 was

\$930 (US). Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, once adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), was estimated at \$2,892 (US) (Nuri 2002). While the economy is slowly recovering after the financial crisis and the tragic events of 1997–1999, the per capita GDP remains low for the region, as revealed by a comparison with the 1999 figures for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (\$4,590 (US)) and Bulgaria (\$5,070 (US)).

Agriculture and forestry are the main sources of employment and income in Albania. However, in recent years the construction, transport and service sectors have been growing. Remittances from emigrants form another important part of the economy, since 28 per cent of Albanian families receive them, and they represent 13 per cent of the total income among Albanian households (World Bank 2003). The registered unemployment rate increased from 12.3 per cent in 1996 to 18.3 per cent in 1999, but these figures underestimate the true situation. According to the World Bank, approximately 20 per cent of the population lives in very poor conditions, with 10 per cent on less than \$2 (US) per day (World Bank 2003).

The Albanian writer Fatos Lubonja is a prominent voice of moral authority in his country, having spent seventeen years in communist prisons, and having a family history of intellectual resistance. He recently had this to say:

Only someone who does not know Albania well can think that Albania is a country in transition that is approaching a liberal democracy and the free market. Albania requires a yearly budget of 2 billions of dollars. Of these, 350 million are derived from the legal economy. Another 350 come from the trafficking of drugs and human beings; 175 million comes from prostitution, and 600 from the remittances of Albanians who work in foreign countries. The rest of Albania's income is from foreign loans and foreign aid. If these are the actual figures, can you reasonably think that the trafficking of human beings will come to an end? Of course not. It is an integral part of the economy. (Bazzocchi 2004 [Translation: A. Pieroni]).

### *Public Health*

The healthcare sector in Albania is publicly owned, and the Ministry of Health (MOH) is the major provider of services, while the private sector is limited to the distribution and commercialization of pharmaceuticals and to dental-care services. Nevertheless, the last decade has seen the establishment of a few private outpatient practices and diagnostic centres in urban areas, especially Tirana. A health insurance scheme is offered by the Health Insurance Institute (HII), covering general practitioner (GP) services and subsidizing approximately 350 pharmaceuticals. According to the 'Law on Health Insurance', it is obligatory for all economically active individuals in Albania, whether they are employees, employers, self-employed, or unpaid family workers, to contribute to the scheme

and obtain a 'license', while the state pays for children, students, retired people, disabled people, unemployed people, pregnant women, and citizens under compulsory military service. However, data from 2002 show that only about 39 per cent of the total population and only 17 per cent of people living in the mountain regions report having health insurance.

Primary healthcare (PHC) is provided by healthcare centres and clinics in rural areas. In addition, PHC in urban areas is also provided by large polyclinics offering specialized outpatient care. Secondary and tertiary care is offered by public hospitals and clinics. Albania has one of the lowest ratios of hospital beds per inhabitants in all of Europe. Its number of beds per 100,000 inhabitants is less than half the average of the EU countries. Despite its low per capita income level and limited health services, life expectancy in Albania is seventy-two years for men and seventy-eight for women, one of the highest life expectancies in the area, and higher than the average of the EU and all Europe. A vegetable-based diet and a healthy lifestyle, especially in the south, have been cited as possible reasons for these positive indicators (Gjonça and Bobak 1997).

Infant mortality is particularly high in rural areas, where most of the poorest people live. Circulatory diseases are still the most important cause of mortality in Albania. Fewer are dying of infectious, respiratory or gastric diseases, but deaths due to injuries and tumours have increased markedly.

About 30 per cent of Albanians buy nonprescription drugs when ill. While there are no income differences among people buying these pharmaceuticals, there are large regional differences. As many as 43 per cent of Albanians living in the mountainous areas in the north and northeastern parts of the country are likely to buy nonprescription drugs when ill, regardless of their age (Nuri 2002). Recent scientific surveys (Hotchkiss et al. 2005; Vian et al. 2006) have clearly underlined another more serious barrier to healthcare services, particularly among the poor, in the form of unofficial payments to healthcare providers for services that are supposed to be provided at no charge to the patient. Factors promoting these informal payments include perceived low salaries of health staff, a belief that good health is worth paying for, the desire to get better service, the fear of being denied treatment, and the tradition of giving gifts to express gratitude. However, there is ample evidence that a large proportion of the nonformal payments are not voluntary, but are either requested or expected (Lewis 2000).

## Lëpushë, Upper Kelmend, Northern Albania

On 14 July 2004, I arrived in the village of Lëpushë, which is located in the Northern Albanian Alps, and belongs to the upper part of the northern commune of Kelmend, in the District of Malësia e Madhe (Figure 2.1).

For many years during the nineteenth century, life in the mountains of the north was managed by networks of patrilineal clans, known as *fis* (Doja 1999). The Kelmendi were originally a northern Catholic tribe whose origins Johann von Hahn (1854: 183–184) has located in a mountainous area on the present-day border between Albania and Montenegro. The patriarch of the tribe, Clement, settled in Bestána, a place in the lower Kelmend area, which von Hahn visited on his travels in the middle of the nineteenth century and described as presenting ‘the remains of an old church, a few houses, and vines that had reverted to a wild state’ (von Hahn 1854: 184). Clement had seven sons, who became the founders of various *fis*. Selcë was founded by Kola, the oldest son; Vukël was founded by Vuko; Nikç was founded by Nika; and Vuthaj, which is not far from present-day Gusinje on the other side of the mountains in Montenegro, was founded by the sons Balla and Unthai. We do not know the names



Figure 2.1. Albania and the Kelmend commune (map on the left from [www.national-symbol.com](http://www.national-symbol.com))

of the remaining two sons who are believed to have founded Martinovic, from where further descendents founded Bukova in the Dukagjini area (to the east of the present-day Kelmend commune) and Lapo in Kosova (von Hahn 1854: 184; Baxhaku and Kaser 1996: 110–111).

The Kelmendi tribe retained its Catholicism, which it strongly defended against the Ottoman occupation, with only a few families converting to Islam in Nikç. Catholicism was also secretly practised during the communist era from 1944 to 1991.

The people in Kelmend speak Albanian Gheg, which is also spoken in Kosova. The name of the village, Lëpushë, means in the local dialect ‘butterbur’ (*Petasites hybridus* (L.) P. Gaertn., B. Mey. & Scherb.), a herbaceous plant (also known as ‘bog rhubarb’) which grows in large amounts during the summer in the small glacial valley where the village is located (Figure 2.2).

The area around Lëpushë is mountainous, with an average summer temperature of 16°C. In winter there are frequent, large snowfalls, and the average temperature is –3°C (Progni 2002). The landscape is characterized by alpine pastures and beech forests. At 1260 metres above sea level, Lëpushë is the highest village in Albania, and it is also one of the most isolated in the entire Albanian Alps. Situated in a small valley less than one kilometre from the Montenegro border, it consists of about twenty-five households, with an overall population of approximately one hundred. There are official plans of the Albanian Government to enlarge a nearby national park in northern Albania, so that it takes in some of the northern and eastern parts of upper Kelmend including the area surrounding Lëpushë. However, these plans have not yet been realized (Hoda and Zotaj 2004).



**Figure 2.2.** Panoramic view of the glacial valley of Lëpushë, in a photograph and in a painting by Ilir Grishaj

The first inhabitants of Lëpushë settled in the present area at the beginning of the twentieth century, having moved further north into the mountains from the lower villages of Vukël and Nikç (Progni 2002: 251). Lower Kelmend is a very inhospitable area, characterized by the two valleys of the Cem rivers (Cemi i Vuklit and Cemi i Selcës), and completely covered by stones, where to gain even a small piece of arable land has surely been an extremely hard task. As the French Consul in Shkodër, Hyacinthe Hecquard, wrote in 1853: 'At first glance it seems impossible that such a sad country, so poor in arable lands, could be inhabited by humans' (Hecquard 1853: 176 [Translation: A. Pieroni]).

That is why people from Vukël, Nikç, and Tamara have generally looked for green pastures in the higher mountains for grazing animals and for cultivating small fields of potatoes and rye during the summertime. In fact, Lëpushë was originally a settlement for shepherds, who lived there only during the summer months; only later on did people begin to remain there during the winter too.

The first precise description of the valley of Lëpushë was made by Franz Baron von Nopcsa, the most important German-speaking scholar in the history of Albanian studies (Nopcsa 1909, 1925, 1927). At the beginning of September 1907, while on one of his many expeditions to northern Albania, he visited Lëpushë when it was apparently uninhabited, and wrote:

Everywhere there are broad flat valleys with beech forests, and occasionally a few sparse fir trees and clearings; we could believe that we had been transported into the Viennese forest, were it not for the looming top of the Trojanë mountain (Nopcsa 1910: 88 [Translation: A. Pieroni]).

Lëpushë was also not mentioned in a census carried out in Kelmend between 1916 and 1918 by occupying Austro-Hungarian troops (Seiner 1922: 29–30).

Interestingly, almost everyone in Lëpushë could tell me the story of how the village was built by shepherds who came from Vukël many years before, but nobody could tell me when the settlement became permanent, even though the village's history must go back less than a hundred years. A similar phenomenon was observed in the lower Kelmend village of Kalcë by Krasztev (2001), who conducted fieldwork there in 1997. He explained it as 'amnesia' produced by the communist era.

## **Post-communism in Northern Albania**

After 1991, the process of democratization in Albania initiated a series of major changes that brought about the rapid privatization of lands and herds to even the most rural and mountainous areas.<sup>1</sup>



In Lëpushë, my informants described to me how the former landowners took back their properties, and how the elderly men of the village played a central role in this process because they remembered who owned the parcels of land and where the boundaries had been before the communist era. From 1991, a more traditional form of political organization developed alongside the institutionalized local authorities in which the male heads of the households (*zoti i shtëpës*) gathered together in village assemblies. These assemblies still exist today in Lëpushë, where the men of the villages meet generally once a year. Every few years they also meet to elect someone, usually the community's most respected male elder, to be the village spokesman. There has been considerable speculation in the social science literature about the complexities Albanians have had to face in returning to their 'roots' following the fall of communism. One of the main concerns has been the resurgence of ancient blood feuds and their tragic consequences; for example, at times young boys are unable to attend school because of the danger of reprisals. This has become a crucial issue, not only in a few rural and mountainous areas of the north, but also in new urban arenas, where a new criminal class has attempted to appropriate arguments and issues from past 'traditions' to create new conflicts and anarchy (Schwandner-Sievers 1999; Krasztev 2001; Saltmarshe 2001). Other villages in Kelmend have been heavily affected by the return of blood feuds, such as Selcë and its surrounding smaller villages, traditionally the centre of blood feuds, where much of the male population has been decimated over the years (Seiner 1922: 29).<sup>2</sup>

While Lëpushë has remained untouched by blood feuds, the village has been much more affected by the collapse of the local economy immediately after 1991. With the elimination of the collectives and the reduction of jobs in the public sector, public transport was cancelled, regular maintenance of the roads ceased, and unemployment became a widespread phenomenon in the north. In the last fifteen years, the majority of the region's younger inhabitants have left, either to find work in Shkodër or Tirana, or they have migrated to Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom and, especially, the United States.

In fact, since 1991 more people have left the village than have stayed. The majority of those remaining in the mountains are elderly people who do not want to leave, or members of the 'middle-generation' who have young children and who generally have not been successful in their attempts to leave the country illegally.

Even more dramatic for the local people in upper Kelmend was the political upheaval of 1997, when Albania experienced a few months of quite complete anarchy. At that time, all forms of communication infrastructure in Kelmend were destroyed, including telephone cables, and as of 2004 they still had not been repaired. The upper part of Kelmend has been largely cut off from the world ever since, and for several months of the year it is



**Figure 2.3.** Potato fields in the higher part of the valley on the outskirts of Lëpushë

completely inaccessible. The Montenegrin mobile phone network works irregularly in the mountains of Kelmend, although there is a project being undertaken by a multinational telecommunications company to establish a network in northern Albania that will cover the entire Kelmend.

The economy of Lëpushë today is largely subsistence oriented. Each household owns a few cows and pigs, and perhaps a few sheep. The villagers cultivate their own potatoes, corn and cabbages for the production of sauerkraut, and a few vegetables such as onions and garlic in their homegardens. Fields of potatoes are also cultivated in the shallow topsoil of the glacial valleys higher up the mountains (Figure 2.3) and in the alpine pastures where the hamlets of shepherds are located.

A few households in upper Kelmend are able to earn some cash by selling cheese and potatoes in Shkodër, and more interestingly, by the uncontrolled exploitation of timber (Figure 2.4) and dried *sahlep* (bulbs of wild orchids, Orchidaceae), which also find their way to Shkodër. The timber purchased in Shkodër is sold in Tirana, Italy or the Balkans, while the dried *sahlep* usually ends up in Turkey.

After 1991, the border between Albania and Montenegro/Yugoslavia lost its strategic importance, and the people of Lëpushë finally began to have free access to the alpine pastures located along the border. This was an area that had remained off-limits for many decades, having been tightly



**Figure 2.4.** Timber ready to be transported to Shkodër

controlled by the military border police of the communist regime. In fact, it was not until 2002 that the last military forces left Lëpushë, giving the villagers the opportunity to ‘colonize’ parcels of virgin land higher up the mountains, which are now generally used for grazing animals and cultivating potatoes and rye.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the major source of revenue comes from the remittances from emigrants to the EU and U.S.A., who send money back to the members of their extended family who have remained ‘at home’, generally via the Western Union office in Shkodër. Other authors have emphasised how remittances are perceived in Albania as being many families’ best if not only means of escaping poverty (De Soto et al. 2002: 39; King and Vullnetari 2003: 48; Uruçi and Gedeshi 2003). On the other hand, if return migration is an increasingly relevant phenomenon in other parts of Albania, it is not an issue in upper Kelmend.

## **Provision of Healthcare in Lëpushë**

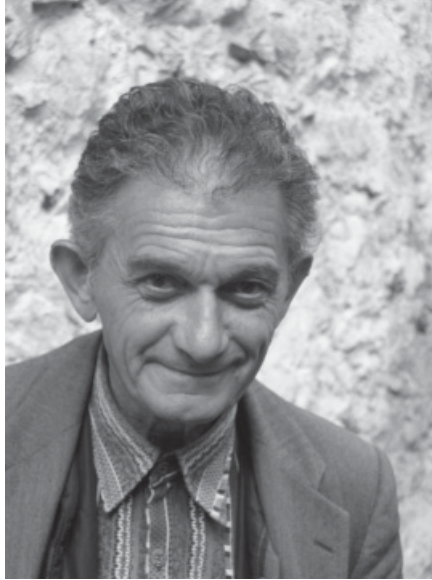
Well, it is a good thing that you are beginning this study on our traditional medicinal plants here. We need to use these herbs, since GPs and hospitals are too far away for us now...

The head of the Kelmend commune made this comment in July 2004 after I had explained the research that I had begun a few days before. People in upper Kelmend nowadays feel they have been abandoned by the institutionalized health system, because since the fall of the communist regime, they have lost all their doctors and nurses. The head of the household (*zoti i shtëpisë*), and my host, explained:

You know, we actually still should have one nurse here in Lëpushë, but her current salary is so low that during the entire summer she lives in her hut at 2,000 metres above sea level, hours away from the village, in order to let her few cows and sheep graze the pastures there.

Thus proper medical care is practically nonexistent at the moment in Lëpushë. The nearest health centre and doctor is in Tamara, which is more than an hour-and-a-half's drive away by four-wheel drive vehicle. Also, from November until April communication and travel between Lëpushë and Tamara are often blocked for many weeks by snow. According to my informants in Lëpushë, the health centre of Tamara is equipped with very few clinical facilities and has only a few pharmaceuticals, many of which are already out of date. During the summer, a general practitioner (GP) from Shkodër makes irregular visits to a few families, if they are in desperate need and request her help; these consultations are paid for in cash. The case of a patient living in Lëpushë with very advanced multiple sclerosis springs to mind: this man has been looked after solely by his wife and daughters, having not received a single medical visit for more than three years. Tragically, in the spring of 2004 a young girl aged fourteen years died of appendicitis in Lëpushë because no medical assistance was available there and because of a heavy snowfall it was impossible for her to reach the nearest hospital in Shkodër.

Healthcare in Lëpushë means self-medication, provided within the households. Not one of my interviewees has ever been enrolled in the national insurance system. When major troubles occur, these people have to go to the hospital in Shkodër or even to Tirana, which costs them a month's wages. When they visit Shkodër, they generally stock up on prescription pharmaceuticals and over-the-counter (OTC) products, which they store at home in case they are needed. Another crucial part of their healthcare is represented by the use of TMs, delivered generally by the women in the house, or very occasionally by the last remaining 'herbal healer', Simon, aged 64 years, who lives in the nearby village of Gropa (Figure 2.5). According to local people in Lëpushë, the use of TMs increased after the health system collapsed, as many of them went back to the many traditional remedies, whose detailed knowledge is generally retained by the oldest members of the community.



**Figure 2.5.** Simon, the last herbal healer of Gropa

## Gathering Bime Mjeksore in Lëpushë

Up until this study, no ethnobotanical research had been carried out in Albania; the only existing reference was a literature survey on botanical folk names in diverse areas of the Albanian-speaking Balkans (Sejdiu 1984). The only ethnographic account published in the West during the last fifty years was a survey of local biographies in Albania, which included a chapter on Kelmend, and impressive photographic documentation (Sheer and Senechal 1997).

The aim of this field study, conducted during the summers of 2004 and 2005, was to document TM and traditional knowledge (TK) related to the use of local medicinal and wild food plants in Lëpushë and the surrounding shepherds' hamlets (*stanë*) of Berizhdol, Koprrisht, Trojanë, Dobk, Vajushë and Pajë (Figure 2.6), which are inhabited only during the summer.

The settlement of Berizhdol, which is located close to the border with the former Yugoslavia, was in existence during the communist era. However, the other *stanë* have been established since early in the 1990s, when the privatization of land and herds was completed. These settlements are inhabited only in summer and mainly by shepherds from Lëpushë and especially from Vukël.

The methodological framework chosen for this study was that generally used in ethnobotany (Alexiades and Sheldon 1996; Cotton 1996), cognitive



**Figure 2.6.** A few huts (*stanë*) in the hamlet of Pajë

anthropology (Berlin 1992; D’Andrade 1995), ethnography (O’Reilly 2004) and ethnopsychiatry (Nadig 2000). The fieldwork was carried out by using in-depth participant observation and unstructured and semistructured interviews and discussions, with individuals and groups, among approximately ninety persons in Geg Albanian (with the help of a simultaneous interpreter) and Italian languages (a large portion of the inhabitants of northern Albania speak Italian, generally learned by watching Italian television programmes). Prior informed consent (PIC) was obtained verbally, while ethical guidelines adopted by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and by the International Society of Ethnobiology (ISE) were rigorously followed. Identification of the plant taxa was conducted in the field following the standard botanical reference *Albanian Flora* (Paparisto and Qosja 1988–2000). Voucher specimens were deposited at the Pharmacognosy Herbarium of the University of Bradford.

*Bime mjeksore* (medicinal plants) are gathered in the summer pastures by the local people for their domestic needs. They are dried and used in the households during the winter for minor health troubles. We recorded approximately 70 botanical taxa and 160 folk pharmaceutical preparations, mostly derived from plants, but also from animal products and minerals (Pieroni et al. 2005). Table 2.1 shows the most commonly gathered, wild medicinal plants in upper Kelmend together with their folk medicinal uses.

Table 2.1. The most commonly gathered plants for medicine in Lëpushë

Botanical taxa, families and voucher specimen codes	Albanian folk names recorded in Lëpushë	Parts used	Administration	Folk medicinal uses
<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i> L. (Aspleniaceae) LEP-ASP	<i>Fier guri</i>	Aerial parts, dried	Decoction	To treat kidney stones
<i>Chelidonium majus</i> L. (Papaveraceae) LEP-CHE	<i>Bar saralleku</i> / <i>Bar verriçi</i>	Aerial parts, fresh	Decoction, drunk with sugar in small portions (half a coffee cup), eventually increasing the dose over time	To treat hepatitis ( <i>saralleku</i> )
<i>Gentiana lutea</i> L. (Gentianaceae) LEP-GEN	<i>Kshanza</i>	Roots	Macerated in wild plum distillate ( <i>raki</i> ) or in cold water for 1–2 days	To prevent heart disease
<i>Hypericum maculatum</i> Crantz (Hypericaceae) LEP-HYP	<i>Balsam</i> / <i>Caj verdhë</i> / <i>Bar pezmet</i> / <i>Caj bjeshke</i>	Aerial parts, dried	Decoction	To treat digestive troubles and diarrhoea (also used as a veterinary preparation, especially for sheep); to treat stomach ache; as a tranquilizer; drunk every morning as a diuretic; to treat flu, sore throat, coughs and bronchitis; as an antihelmintic (used as a veterinary preparation for calves)
			Oleolite	To treat burns

Table 2.1. continued

Botanical taxa, families and voucher specimen codes	Albanian folk names recorded in Lëpushë	Parts used	Administration	Folk medicinal uses
<i>Lilium martagon</i> L. (Liliaceae) LEP-LIJ	<i>Bar tamthi</i>	Tubers, dried	Decoction	To treat all liver diseases (also used as a veterinary preparation)
<i>Origanum vulgare</i> L. (Lamiaceae) LEP-ORI	<i>Caj</i> <i>Caj malhit</i>	Aerial parts (including flowers)	Infusion	Originally used to treat coughs; nowadays drunk as a recreational beverage, and also as diuretic and digestive
<i>Phyllitis scolopendrium</i> (L.) Newman. (Aspleniaceae) LEP-SCO	<i>Bar mushkruisë</i>	Leaves, fresh	Decoction	To treat all respiratory afflictions and lung disorders
<i>Plantago major</i> L. (Plantaginaceae) LEP-PLA	<i>Dejça</i>	Leaves, fresh	Applied topically	Haemostatic, anti-bacterial and suppurative
<i>Rosa canina</i> L. (Rosaceae) LEP-ROS	<i>Kaça</i>	Inflorescence, dried Pseudo-fruits	Decoction Decoction	Diuretic To improve digestion and treat flu; anti-rheumatic; used to prevent various illnesses
<i>Sedum telephium</i> L. (Crassulaceae) LEP-SED	<i>Babanik</i>	Leaves, fresh	Decoction, applied externally After the epicuticular portion is removed, the lower part of the leaf blade is applied to the skin	To heal eczema Suppurative



Table 2.1. continued

Botanical taxa, families and voucher specimen codes	Albanian folk names recorded in Lëpushë	Parts used	Administration	Folk medicinal uses
<i>Sempervivum tectorum</i> L. (Crassulaceae) LEP-SEM	<i>Houseleek</i>	Juice from the leaves	Applied in the ear	To treat earache
<i>Tussilago farfara</i> L. (Asteraceae) LEP-TUS	<i>Thundërmushka</i> / <i>Bar mushkë</i> / <i>Xhur mushk</i>	Leaves, dried	Decoction	To treat coughs
		Leaves, fresh	Applied externally for about 12 hours	To treat wounds; anti-rheumatic
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> L. (Ericaceae) LEP-VAC	<i>Boronica</i>	Fruits, dried	Decoction; cooked in syrup and jams; macerated in wild plum distillate ( <i>rakë</i> )	To treat intestinal troubles; anti-diarrheic; 'to strengthen the stomach' and the eyes (especially in children); for 'cleansing the blood'
		Fruits, fresh	Jam	To treat abdominal pains

When the informants talked about *bime* (plants) and especially *bime mjeksore* (medicinal plants), they immediately divided them into the following two categories:

1. Plants that were gathered during the communist era by the local collectives, and then transported to the main northern Albanian centre of Shkëoder.
2. Plants that have been and are still gathered for use in the household.

During the communist era, many medicinal and toxic plants were gathered by individuals who sold them to local pharmacies. These included yarrow (*Achillea millefolium* L.), club moss (*Lycopodium clavatum* L.), burdock (*Arctium lappa* L.), wild strawberry leaves (*Fragaria vesca* L.), autumn crocus (*Colchicum autumnale* L.) and elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* L.), but the trade ceased after 1991. Only wild strawberries are still collected for domestic use and also for producing homemade jams, which have been sold since 2004 in Shkëoder.

Wild sage (*Salvia officinalis* L., *sherbel* or *medër*) is still gathered in lower Kelmend and in many areas in Albania (though not in upper Kelmend, in areas north of Selcë, where sage does not grow) and exported to western Europe and U.S.A. in huge amounts. It is estimated that one thousand tons of the dried herb were exported in 2001 (Kathe, Honnef and Heym 2003: 79).

In Upper Kelmend, most of the *bime mjeksore* are gathered for personal consumption and are not destined to be traded. Only in the summer of



Figure 2.7. Woman showing *caj* (*Origanum vulgare*)

2005 did the people in upper Kelmend begin to gather *caj* or *caj malhit* (wild oregano, *Origanum vulgare*, Figure 2.7) and *balsam* or *caj verdhë* or *caj bjeshke* (the local St John's wort, *Hypericum maculatum*) for commercial purposes, due to the initiative of the local Italian Franciscan priest. These dried herbs are now sold to the priest, who in turn sells them and other food products from the mountains in a small shop in Shkodër owned by the Catholic Church.

During the summer, *sahlep* (wild orchid bulbs, *Orchis* spp.) are also gathered in the alpine pastures, dried and sold in Shkodër (Figure 2.8). Many wild orchids are of course included in the IUCN Red List of threatened species. However, there is debate about whether those who gather or sell *sahlep* and those who buy them should be criminalized for doing so (see Kasperek and Grimm 1999, and response by Ertuğ 2000 and Pieroni 2000).

Gathering *sahlep* is at present one of the most profitable activities undertaken by the poorest shepherd families of the mountains, where a household's monthly income is often less than fifty euros. One kilogram of dried *sahlep* tubers can be sold for between sixty and seventy euros. Other authors estimate that at least one hundred tons of dried *sahlep* tubers are gathered yearly in Albania (Kathe, Honnef and Heym 2003), probably mainly for the Turkish market. In Turkey, ground *sahlep* is frequently used to prepare the homonymous national beverage, which is drunk hot, especially in the winter. The illegal gathering of *sahlep* and the uncontrolled exploitation of timber are the most critical conservation issues in upper Kelmend today.

I have observed that a few species of wild herbs (e.g., *Lilium martagon*, *Sedum telephium*) are sometimes transplanted into the villagers' homegardens, which are located close to the house, so that families can readily harvest these herbs when they are needed.



Figure 2.8. Gathering and drying *sahlep* in the Northern Albanian Alps

An important category of wild medicinal plants is represented by the folk generic *caj* (Figure 2.9). The term *caj* has its linguistic origin in the Chinese *tschai*, which roughly translates to the English word *tea*. *Caj* in standard Albanian means both the leaves of the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, and the hot beverage obtained from them. In northern Albania, however, locals use the term *caj* to indicate all wild, herbaceous plants or herbs that are dried and used in infusions, generally with a lot of sugar added, and drunk as both a social beverage and as a medicine. The prototype of *caj* in northern Albania is the simple *caj* or *caj malhit* ('mountain tea', *Origanum vulgare*). Its aerial parts are gathered during the flowering season in July and August, dried and used to prepare an infusion, which is served frequently in the morning and also in the evening. Dried *caj* also represents the most common 'travelling plant' that Albanian migrants take with them when they move abroad; hence it has strong cultural importance.



Figure 2.9. Representation of the ethnotaxonomy of the folk generic *caj*

*Hypericum maculatum* (alpine St John's wort, *caj verdhë* [yellow *caj*], or *caj bjeshke* [alpine pastures' *caj*]) is also gathered and used in upper Kelmend, but much less often than the true *caj*. *Caj verdhë* is perceived primarily as an herb to be used in decoctions for healing purposes. It is very rarely consumed as a social beverage. A St John's wort species was also mentioned by Edith Durham as being externally used in the Shala Valley, east of the Kelmend commune, to treat wounds and cuts (Durham 1909: 115). This use is very common in the medical folklore of Europe.

*Caj e egër* is the term local people generally give to aromatic plants that are morphologically similar to the 'true' *caj* (*O. vulgare*), but are not very useful. For example, a few informants in Lëpushë consider *Thymus serpyllum* L. (*caj e egër*) to be inferior to *O. vulgare* because the aerial parts of *T. serpyllum* are considered too small and immature for making *caj* (Figure 2.9).

The habit of drinking *caj*, as well as that of drinking coffee, were introduced during the long period of Ottoman domination in Albania (fifteenth to twentieth centuries), and are regarded as essentially an urban pastime. It is interesting to note that 'peripheral' people living in the countryside and in the mountains have adopted this urban tradition, but that they utilize their own indigenous plant resources as substitutes for the original urban tea. Another recent study has analysed how the word *té* (tea) in Spain refers to at least seventy different plant species, which are usually collected in the countryside, boiled dry or fresh, and drunk after meals (Pardo-de-Santayana, Blanco and Morales 2005). Drinking *té* in Spain seems primarily to serve a social function, but the practice is perceived also as being beneficial to the digestion and the stomach. This might be another case of a new 'adaptation' of the older tradition of using local wild plants in decoctions as a medicine, which could be why these teas are so popular.

## The Doctrine of Signatures

From the data collected during my fieldwork, it is evident that the archaic 'doctrine of signatures' is still an important ethnomedical concept among the Albanians of Lëpushë. The doctrine of signatures, which has been widespread in the folk medical practices of the Mediterranean area since ancient times, certainly well before the treatises of Paracelsus and Giambattista Porta of the sixteenth century (quoted, for example, in Dafni and Lev 2002), is based on the principle that the appearance of plants indicates their medicinal properties.

For example, the aerial parts of *Chelidonium majus*, which has a yellow latex, are used to treat jaundice; the leaves of the fern *Phyllitis scolopendrium*, which is called locally 'the herb of the lungs', are thought to

be useful in treating all respiratory and lung afflictions since the shape of lower leaf lamina resembles a human lung. Likewise, the bulbs of *Lilium martagon*, known locally as the ‘herb of the liver’, are used to treat liver diseases, since the colour of the flowers resembles that of the liver (Figure 2.10); and the mineral jasper, which is blood red in colour, is ground into milk and given to sheep to drink because it is believed this mineral allows blood to converge in the animals’ heads, thereby indirectly healing any ailments. Finally, the membrane from a hen’s stomach is used to treat human kidney stones, because there are often small stones present in the muscular stomach of poultry, which have been ingested by the hen to assist in grinding its food. All of these remedies are reportedly still commonly used in Lëpushë.

## Local Foods

People in Lëpushë state that the variety of food they can now afford to produce for their own consumption is a dream compared with the meagre daily diet and the hunger they experienced during the days of communism. All dairy produce at that time was taken by the cooperatives, and families had only potatoes, bread – sometimes covered with a very small amount of grated cheese – and onions to eat as staples. The issue of hunger is often raised in the narratives of the people of Lëpushë, and all of them have described the food situation they are experiencing at present as ‘far better than it was before’.

Today’s daily diet of a typical household in Lëpushë is based on many dairy products, potatoes, a few vegetables (especially onions), corn for

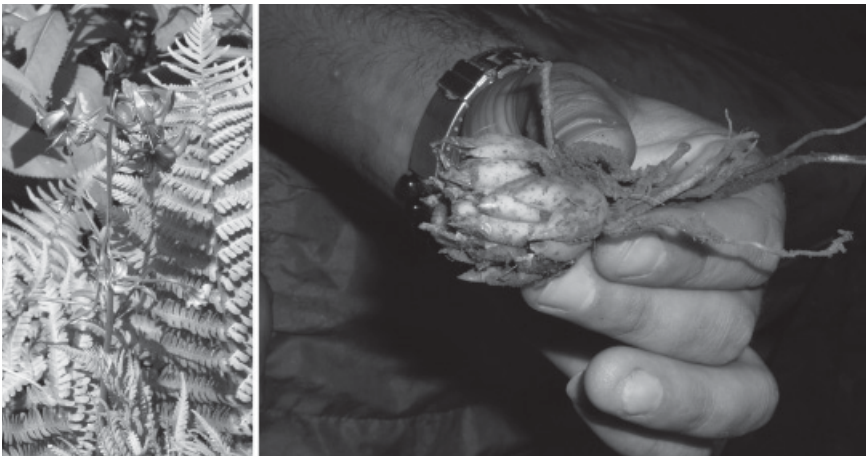
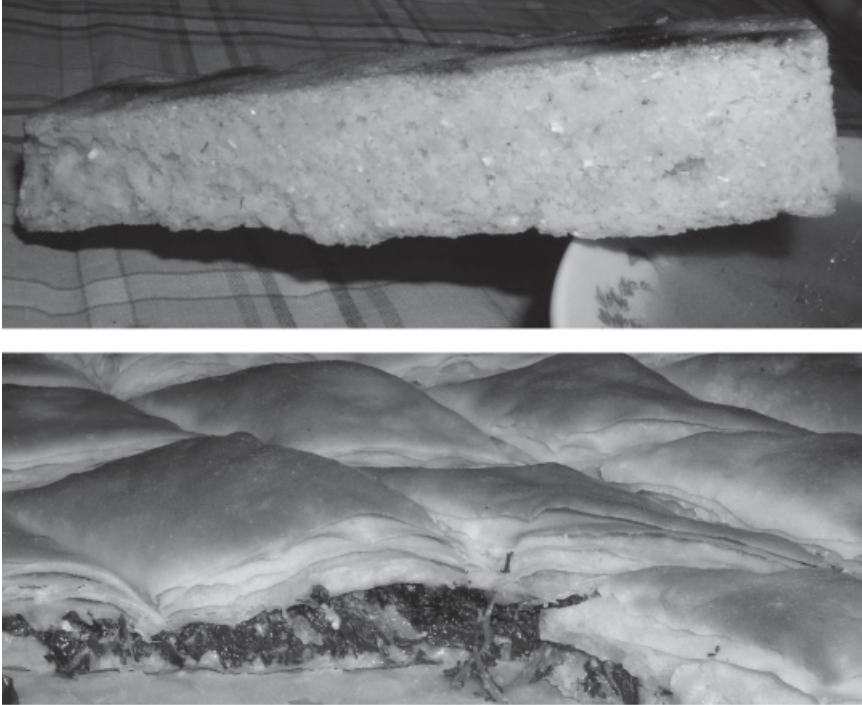


Figure 2.10. *Lilium martagon*



**Figure 2.11.** Corn bread and *byrek*, filled with *nena*

baking the traditional corn bread (Figure 2.11), and, especially in winter, sauerkraut and pork. The good health of their two to four cows and the production of milk is a critical factor for each family in the village. Every day throughout the summer all the cows of the village are taken by the children and teenagers to graze in the higher alpine pastures. Every evening they are brought back and milked just as darkness falls. During the winter the cows are kept in the village and fed with hay. It is during haymaking that the village clearly shows its complex social networks, as it is not unusual to see male members of diverse families helping one another to make hay, to let it dry, or to bring it in, if rain looks imminent (Figure 2.12).

Haymaking in the summer is hard, physical work, but it is also one of the most important tasks for each household. Without enough hay for the cows families could find themselves in a desperate situation because without their cows ‘a family can die of hunger’. This point was made repeatedly by my informants. The belief in the evil eye – that an envious gaze can cause harm, often unintentionally, to those being watched – is quite widespread in Lëpushë. Locals think the evil eye can badly affect a cow’s health so that the animal becomes weak and will not produce any



**Figure 2.12.** Collecting and storing hay

more milk. It is therefore common to see cows grazing in the pastures wearing talismans that protect against the evil eye. These are made out of a piece of red cloth that contains one garlic clove, coffee beans and grains of salt (Figure 2.13). When an animal gets very sick and the talismans appear not to be working any more, a few old women in the village are called in to treat the illness, generally by making the animal drink hot



**Figure 2.13.** Cow wearing amulet against the evil eye



water mixed with ashes, or by performing ritual healing by reciting special incantations.

Also crucial to the domestic economy of each family are pigs. Each family owns one to three pigs, which range freely in the village. Although it surprises many foreign travellers, it is actually not uncommon to see pigs running everywhere in the villages of northern Albania and their surrounding areas. The pigs are butchered in winter and their meat is generally cured and stored and used throughout the year. Fodder beet (*pangjari*) and rye (*theker*) are expressly cultivated as pig fodder, while the leaves of beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica* L., *ahu*), nettle (*Urtica* spp., *hithër*) and alpine dock (*Rumex alpinus* L., *nena elpiet*) are gathered from the wild. All these plants are boiled and then given to the pigs. For ‘strengthening’ the pigs and as a galactagogue for cows, locals frequently gather aerial parts of the cow parsnip (*Heracleum sphondylium* L., *barovina*), while wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*, *caj e egër*) is thought to give the milk a very nice flavour if it is fed to sheep and cows.

Local dairy products are the basis of the diet and include: milk (*tomël*), yoghurt (*kos*), cheese (*diathë*), butter (*burrofresko*), *tëlynë* (a sort of clarified butter which is prepared by heating butter for an hour and then filtering it), cream (*mazë*), *jardun* (obtained by heating sheep milk with salt for approximately one hour), curd cheese (*gjizë*), whey (*hirra* or *qumësht*), colostrum (*koloster*) – when the cows have given birth — and *mishavin*. *Mishavin* is a type of creamy cheese that is prepared by fermenting grated cheese and salt for at least two months in a receptacle sealed on the top but with a few holes in the bottom through which the liquid is continuously expelled. The result is a creamy, dense and fragrant product, of which large quantities are consumed during the cold winter months as a ‘strengthening’ food.

Locals use their cheese to prepare two of their most traditional dishes: *diathe zje*, a kind of porridge prepared by heating cheese with *burrofresko*, salt and flour; and *kaçimak*, which involves mixing boiled potatoes with the same ingredients as *diathe zje*. From colostrum, it is customary to prepare a sweet dish called *perpeq*, which is made with eggs, honey or sugar, and soda.

Throughout Albania families usually produce large amounts of their own alcohol. In Lëpushë, this *raki* is made by distilling fermented small, red plums. The drink appears to serve as a social lubricant, and is thus consumed whenever people congregate or socialize. It would be considered shameful for a *zoti i shtëpisë* (male head of the family) to have guests and not be able to offer them *raki*. A family of five members are said to easily consume as much as 250 litres of *raki* in a year.

During my field studies I observed the increased consumption of other forms of alcohol besides *raki*, and tobacco, among males of upper Kelmend. Up until 2004 there were only two bars in nearby Qafa Predelec,

which sold beer, spirits and cigarettes. In the summer of 2005 I counted five bars. The consumption of beer is new to the area and is perceived as a modern and sophisticated pastime. The price of a bottle of beer is very high by Albanian standards (roughly one euro), and that is maybe why a few informants came to me with the suggestion that ‘a good idea for the future development in our areas would be to establish a small brewery so that we could be self-sufficient’.

It is interesting to note how the issue of ‘being self-sufficient’ – in other words, being independent from any external influences – is raised repeatedly in northern Albania. Being self-sufficient is perceived by the locals as their ‘destiny’ and a virtue. Others have emphasised how the issue of isolation has been important in building the Albanian identity (Krasztev 2002; Schwandner-Sievers 2002), but a recent ethnoarchaeological and ethnohistorical fieldwork has shown instead that population changes in the Shala Valley (Northern Albanian Alps) were influenced by several external forces ‘despite the seeming isolation of the northern tribes’ (Lee and Galaty 2007).

Among the most gathered wild plants, it is important to mention a few herbs and fruit such as strawberries, raspberries and bilberries, which are usually eaten raw or in the form of syrups or jam.

More than half of all recorded wild-food plants in upper Kelmend are considered by the locals to be medicinal foods – foods that are deliberately ingested in order to obtain a specific medicinal effect – or what I and my colleague Cassandra Quave recently defined as ‘folk functional foods’, which are foods that are ingested because they are reputed to be ‘healthy’ (Pieroni and Quave 2006). These perceptions once again confirm that in the provision of domestic healthcare the difference between food and medicine is unclear, and that food plants are often ingested because they are perceived to prevent or even cure certain diseases (Pieroni and Price 2006).

### Bara e Egër as Food

‘Wild herbs’ (*bara e egër*) that are used for food are gathered during the late spring and summer only. Among the most culturally important taxa are wild garlic (*lertha*, *Allium triquetrum* L.), which is eaten raw or boiled in soups, nettle (*hither*, *Urtica dioica* L.) and *nena* (edible *Chenopodium* and *Rumex* spp.) leaves, which are boiled and used as a filling for *byrek* (see Figure 2.11).

People in northern Albania use the term *nena* to indicate various wild plants, whose leaves are generally consumed boiled, and used as a stuffing together with *tëlynë*, cream or cheese when preparing the typical Albanian pie called *byrek*, which is well known also in other Balkan countries and especially in Turkey.

*Chenopodium bonus-henricus* L., Good King Henry, is the prototype of this group of taxa. It is called simply *nená*, or *nená e butë*, which literally means ‘true’ *nená*, or *nená e bjeshkes* (‘alpine pasture *nená*’). The other members of this group (*Chenopodium album* L. (fat hen), and *Rumex alpinus* (alpine dock)) are classified in the folk taxonomy of upper Kelmend with folk specificities *nená e egër* (‘wild’ *nená*) and *nená elpiet*. The former (*C. album*) is gathered and cooked in the same manner as the true *nená* (*C. bonus-henricus*), but only if true *nená* is unavailable as fat hen generally is not considered to be edible. The latter (*R. alpinus*) is gathered and used as fodder for pigs, who apparently consider it to be a very tasty vegetable (Fig 2.14).<sup>3</sup>

### Gender Roles in Wild-plant Gathering in Upper Kelmend

As in all of the most traditional areas of northern Albania, in upper Kelmend the men are the only ones allowed to walk far from their houses. Women generally must remain at home, where it is customary for them to dedicate their time to managing the homegarden, cooking and other domestic tasks. They can help men in the fields during the labour-intensive

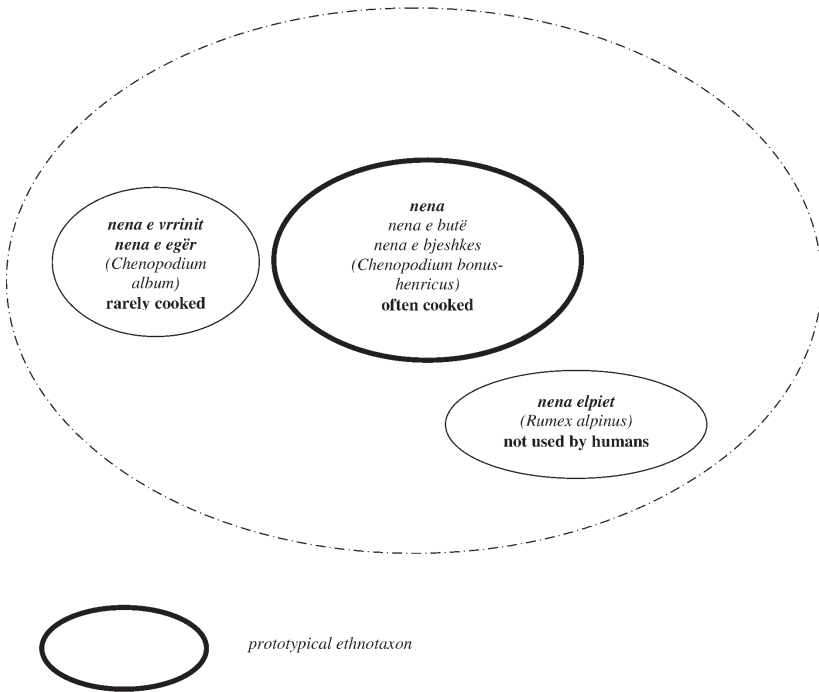


Figure 2.14. Representation of the ethnotaxonomy of the folk generic *nená*

process of making hay in the summer, but only in the presence of the more senior males of the family, for example their fathers-in-law or husbands.

According to customary laws (*Kanun*) in northern Albania, which have always been orally transmitted, but were compiled in written form for the first time by a Kosovar Franciscan in the 1920s (Gjeçov 1989: 238), 'a woman is a sack, made to endure'. Littlewood and Young (2005: 77) have summarized the meaning of gender roles in the *Kanun* in this way: 'women have to perform an essentially child-bearing role as the property of their husbands'. According to the *Kanun*, women cannot be the target of a blood feud, and neither can they inherit any property nor refuse their arranged marriage.

In practice, gender roles are similarly well defined and strictly enforced. Women are only allowed to occupy the domestic sphere. Even amongst younger couples, women have still in a few cases to ask their husbands' permission to go out of the house during the day, even if they just want to buy a few things in the nearby Qafa Predelec, where there is a tiny food store selling a few imported vegetables (tomatoes, sweet peppers), soaps, and a few minor textile items. Moreover, women are generally not allowed to own cash. If they want to buy something, they have to ask their men to give them some money.

Women are the main gatherers of cultivated plants, which they grow in their homegardens or collect from wild areas close to home, particularly nettles and Good King Henry leaves for preparing *byrek*. Children and men are the main gatherers of the medicinal plants, *bime mjeksore*, that grow in the fields and areas far from the house.

### *Plant Knowledge of Women Who Become Men*

I was greatly surprised when the head of the household in which I was staying suggested that I visit the summer settlements in the alpine pastures, which were many hours' walk from the village, with his sister for a guide. His sister, G, is forty years old, cuts her hair short like a man, dresses like a man, and is known by the male name of D or *djalë* ('lad'). The case of G/D is one of the last remaining examples of what in the literature is referred to as northern Albanian 'sworn virgins': women who become men (see Durham 1909: 80 for an early reference and more recent mentions in Grémaux 1993; Young 2000; Littlewood 2002; Littlewood and Young 2005).

During the days I spent in upper Kelmend, I developed a deep friendship with G/D after she/he took me to meet the shepherds and plant gatherers in the very isolated alpine hamlets. I was amazed to observe how G/D's knowledge of the environment encompassed both the homegardens close to the houses, which is generally the domain of the women, and the alpine pastures located very far from the village, which is generally a male

domain. G/D learnt about the homegardens during her/his childhood and especially when she/he was a teenager, but now she/he has taken on a male role in gathering plants. Hence she/he would never gather nettles or Good King Henry leaves, although she/he knows how to recognize and process them. As she/he explained: 'I do not like to cook and do not like any of the things women do at home: washing cloths, ironing, and sewing'.

As Littlewood stated in his account of this phenomenon, 'the occurrence of this third gender in northern Albania does not influence at all the strictly binary gender system of northern Albania, nor does it contribute to a less subdominant position of women' (Littlewood 2002). It is instead a product of this extremely binary system, where gender roles are very strict, and the dominant code is characterized by a strong 'hetero-normative' masculinity (Haller 2001). 'Sworn virgins' are then seen as supporters of patriarchy (Young 2006). As G/D told me once, while we were walking across the mountains:

I did it [changed gender role] after my father died ten years ago. I wanted to be free; now I can walk for hours in the mountains and nobody can touch me; I am free now; I can do what I want and nobody can tell me anything; I can even have my money and buy what I want.

## **Erosion of TK and Prospects of Eco-sustainable Development in Upper Kelmend**

The end of the communist era has allowed the people of Lëpushë to regain their land and their herds, to manage them according to what they consider to be the 'traditional' way, and to 'rediscover' their traditional medicine and local foods. On the other hand, prosperity and new opportunities abroad have also led to the outmigration of the younger members of the village, thereby reducing the likelihood that this TK is transmitted to future generations.

During my last visit, in August 2005, I met a few members of the extended families of Lëpushë who had emigrated a few years earlier and were now back in their village for a short summer holiday. It was common to hear them say: 'How do we cook that, mum? I do not remember it'; or 'I have forgotten how to do this stuff. We live so well in Italy, we don't need it there'. One told me, 'I've been helping my mum and dad store hay for the winter, but I'm really looking forward to going back to Italy soon'.

So while the few remaining children and young people in Lëpushë will retain the villagers' knowledge of how to recognize and gather wild plants, it is doubtful that this TK will be transmitted in the decades to come. Much will depend on how people think about their future and what form it will take in upper Kelmend. The development of ecotourism as well as the implementation of the Balkan Peace Park Project (BPPP

2005) could have an immense impact on northern Albania and upper Kelmend. The Balkan Peace Park Project was conceived and is being led by a world expert on Albania, Antonia Young, and her husband, the peace studies scholar Nigel Young. The Youngs could have a great influence on the daily lives and future prospects of the people of Lëpushë, especially if these communities can be convinced to participate in planning and building the park. Once realized, the park could offer an employment alternative for the young and dynamic members of the community, who at present believe their future lies in escaping from the mountains and finding adventure and opportunity by migrating to New York, Bari or Florence. In time, they may decide it is more attractive to remain in their village and let the world come to them. There could be a huge potential in the Albanian mountains for trekkers and agrotourism (Pieroni 2007); for the sustainable gathering and organic cultivation of high-quality plant products, including medicinal herbs; and for improved production of speciality dairy products, which could be sold to niche markets in Tirana and, perhaps, throughout western Europe. Another key issue is interregional cooperation with bordering Montenegro. Gusinje is less than thirty minutes' drive from Lëpushë by four-wheel drive vehicle, so the barriers to be overcome are more psychological than logistical or linguistic. The BPPP could bring about true reconciliation among the peoples of the region, by improving their understanding of each other, and by providing opportunities for regular exchanges between the two sides of the Trojanë Mountain, especially among the younger generations.

To make all this feasible, the present, appalling state of the roads and telecommunications in upper Kelmend will have to be improved. Perhaps this could be done through foreign aid, but if we analyse international programmes currently working in the area, the scenario is extremely discouraging. The recent United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) initiative 'Enhancing Trans-boundary Biodiversity Management in South Eastern Europe' (UNEP 2006), for example, seems to suggest more restrictive laws for improving biodiversity conservation policies in the area. In the UNEP document terms like 'traditional knowledge' or 'cultural heritage', as well as references to 'emic' views of management of the environment, are completely omitted; moreover, a genuine participatory approach is missing and one of the assumptions seems to be that local people in the area simply overexploit the environment.

The history and the people of Lëpushë show us instead how this particular natural environment might be dynamically managed by taking into account their complex and sophisticated local knowledge systems.

Political and social changes since 1991 have allowed the people in the mountains of northern Albania to 'return' to their roots. This has had a remarkable influence on their perceptions of themselves, their interactions with their natural environment and the way they deal with the extreme

difficulties they have to face every day just to survive. With their natural dynamism and vitality, northern Albanians may be able to work together with external stakeholders to ensure the continuation of their deeply embedded relationship with nature, so that they and their descendents will be able one day to enjoy a secure and viable future in their marvellous mountains.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. A unique, audiovisual, ethnographic document of what actually happened in 1991 when communally owned land and animals were distributed among all the households has been filmed in the village of Rrogam in the Northern Albanian Alps by David Watson and by the unforgettable (and well remembered) Norwegian anthropologist and Albanian specialist Berit Backer (Watson and Backer 1991), who shortly after having produced this video was killed in Oslo by one of her Albanian friends, for whom she had dedicated her entire life.
2. The census of northern Albania, 1916–1918, showed that of all villages in Kelmend, Selcë had 30 per cent more women than men (Seiner 1922: 29).
3. The use of the adjective *e egër* (wild) to define plants that are similar to prototypical ones, but not as useful because they are inedible for humans, has been observed in other contexts; for example, among the Arbëreshë Albanians in southern Italy (Maddalon and Belluscio 1996). As Maddalon and Belluscio write in their very impressive ethnolinguistic analysis of Arbëreshë folk plant names in southern Italy, lexemes produced by adding suffixes do not necessarily represent 'folk specifics' as described by Berlin (1992), since they can indicate taxa belonging to diverse folk generics. The function of the suffix in these cases could be to express functional concepts, for example, edible or inedible for humans (Figure 2.14).

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