

The Spiritual Connection of the Shushica Valley Locals to their Living Place

MSc. Fatlinda Shkurti (PhD Candidate)

Faculty of Human Sciences, University "Ismail Qemali" Vlorë, Albania

Abstract

In this article we will deal with the issue of a population's attitude to and estimation of the geographical environment it lives in with regard to the feelings created in this population with the passing of time.

We will then mention some of the physical and geographical characteristics of the study area: its geographical position, relief, climate and flora and their role on the development of the study area's population.

We will make an evaluation of the area's infrastructure and its role on the communication and connection with the other areas.

The methodology employed is that of a questionnaire. The questionnaire, the data analysis and the publication of results took us a period of one year.

The results were analyzed by giving the social, political and economical reasons that break off the spiritual connection to the living place, the present situation and the tendency by giving conclusions and recommendations that we think will be of great help to the solution of such an important issue in this period of enormous changes in every aspect.

Keywords: spiritual connection, living place, free movement, spiritual richness, developmental strategy.

Introduction

Long since the regional studies include even an important aspect of life; that is, a population's spiritual issues with reference to the evaluation of and the attitude toward the geographical environment this population lives in, which, naturally relate to the feelings created in this population's lifetime.

Due to someone's experience, but also due to the inherited tradition, a series of spiritual feelings expressing someone's connection to his/her living place may be created. This is the issue we will deal with referring to the Upper Valley of Shushica.

Recently, regional geography scholars have emphasized the great role that knowledge on other world and regional cultures play on the creation of such feelings.

Methodology

Studying this great and complicated issue needs sufficient time and appropriate information and data. Accordingly, the best method employed is that of a questionnaire.

A questionnaire form is made to indicate the problem as well as the determinant factors. In other words, the questionnaire was aimed at evidencing the spiritual connection of the valley locals to their living place and at the same time at explaining what represented those people that had totally broken off the connection. To achieve said result questions revealing the appropriate information were prepared, along with verifying questions.

The best recommended methodology to perform the study is a comprehensive questionnaire of people from all the residential areas of the upper valley stream (the geographical aspect) and of people of any nationality, age, sex, marital status, immigration status, profession, educational level, income, living style, cultural level, area-based potential skills, material and spiritual inheritance etc. 661 persons participated in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was carried out for a period of one year followed by a careful analysis of the resulting data. Accordingly the verifying questions were analyzed while the contradictory questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. We are convinced that the questionnaire results reveal the real situation of the entire study area population.

Introduction to the issue

Nowadays one of the main issues of Regional Geography is the one referring to the evaluation of and the attitude toward the geographical environment a population lives in, which, naturally relate to the feelings created in this population's lifetime. Due to someone's experience, but also due to the inherited tradition, a series of spiritual feelings expressing someone's connection to his/her living place may arise. Such feelings depend on many factors such as the life style, the stay in a particular place, the age, the sex, the successes and failures experienced, the strong emotions related to certain key moments, the efforts to earn the living and to improve the living area's conditions, the knowledge on the developmental potential of a specific geographical area, the knowledge on the material and geographical traditions of a specific area, the richness of such traditions etc.

Recently, regional geography scholars have emphasized the great role that knowledge on other world and regional cultures play on the creation of such feelings. They point out the fact that during the last decade, as people were free to travel all over the

world, they faced different cultures and life styles sometimes being under the pressure of more developed and powerful ones due to the fast spread of modern technologies. Accordingly, great changes are happening in the spiritual feelings of people in connection with their living place. More and more people consider themselves as European and even World citizens. In such circumstances, it emerges the significant risk of forgetting or neglecting the affluent material and spiritual inheritance of their country. In other words, the rich inheritance and the extraordinary values of any area or country are facing the risk of extinction. The world is beautiful not only because of its natural diversity, but also because of its human and spiritual diversity.

Accordingly, many interesting studies that test and analyze the modern trends of a population's spiritual connection to its region, country or continent are being performed. The studies show that people are trying to consider themselves citizens of a larger geographical area: citizens of the world. This relates to the extension of human life and professional activities in larger areas due to the formation of great political and economical groups in various countries. In such circumstances, the new relations created are fading due to free movement and communication with distant cultures.

In our country, this important problem of regional geographical science is starting to be referred to. Without pretending any final result on the studied area and being conscious of the shortcomings, I'll try to give my modest help to such a huge geographical problem.

The geographical position of Shushica valley

The valley of Shushica extends on the South Region between the highland of Kurvelesh eastward and the ridge of Cike Lungare westward. It originates from lower Kurvelesh to the Mouth of Kuc stream, following the homonymous river course and continuing until this valley, in a geographical and geo-morphological sense, extends on the field of Myzeqe in Vlora. From the mouth of Kuc stream to the Peshkepi Bridge it is known as River of Vlora and it penetrates the valley with the same name (The valley of Vlora River)¹. (Image no. 1)

The valley of Shushica is 80 km long and 0.5 – 13.2 km wide covering an area of 332 km². It is one of the biggest and most important valleys of the South region. The valley is part of the Ionian tectonic area², which is known for a simple lithological terrigenous construction especially a calcareous one. Such formations make up regularly combined syncline and anticline structures. The role of the separating structures is made evident in the complexity of these structures eastwards for synclines and westwards for

¹ Krutaj, F., Gaçe, B., Abazi, H., " Vlora, the southern port of Adriatic sea", Tirana 2004, page 31, Toena

² Aliqj Sh. *Features of Albanian tectonic structure (1998), Geographical Studies, no.3*

anticlines³. The valley enters two climate areas: the upper and middle parts of the valley enter the hilly Mediterranean climate area, while the lower part (from Drashovica Bridge and on) enters the field Mediterranean climate⁴. From the paleo-geographical point of view, the valley of Shushica extends on two land belts: the upper part of the valley extends on the brown lands, the lower and middle parts of the valley extend on the brown-to-gray lands, while nearby the river bed, and mainly in the lowest part of the valley, one may find alluvial lands⁵.

Two vegetal belts cover in the valley of Shushica: the Mediterranean bushes represented by the subgroups of makje and shibliak in the lower part of the valley, and the oak belt in the upper part of the valley up to 900 m high.

As far as the geographical position of the valley of Shushica is concerned, we may say that it belongs to the district of Vlora. Its territory is parceled among the following communes: the commune of Hore-Vranisht (the upper part), the communes of Brataj and Kote (the middle part) and the communes of Armen, Shushica and Vllahine (the lower part)⁶.

The valley of Shushica, although extending amid high mountain ridges, it contains some important roads: a 61 km-long roadway that connects the city of Vlora to the village of Kuc, which, despite of its bad conditions, is one of the arteries that penetrates through all the valley and connects to the national highway Vlora-Saranda; a crossroad at Peshkepi Bridge that connects the valley of Shushica to the commune of Vllahine and further to the district of Mallakaster and Tepelene; a roadway that leads to the commune of Armen, municipality of Selenice and commune of Shushica. The roadway connecting to the district of Tepelene is the most important one; it goes past the Dushku saddle, passing through the commune of Sevaster up to Tepelene, where it connects to another national highway Tirana-Gjirokaster that continues toward Kakavije – the largest gate to Greece.

As one may notice, the valley of Shushica is not an isolated one; on the contrary it breathes in all directions. However, the bad conditions of roadways obstacle the communication with other regions and residential centers.

³ Same as

⁴ Hydro-metrology Institution. *The Albanian Climate (rainfall manual)*, (1975) Tirana

⁵ Land Study Institution, *The Albanian Land Map*, (1999) Tirana

⁶ Vlora District profile, Tirana 2003, page 30, Toena



Image no. 1 : The geographical position of Shushica Valley

Factors that influence on the fading of a population's spiritual connection to its living place.

Let us first consider in brief the issue with reference to the Albanians.

After the 1990ies, our country underwent a strong fading of the relation between a population and its area, region or country. Such fading may be attributed to several factors, of which, the main ones are as follows:

- *Our country was coming out of an extreme poverty, isolation from the world and lack of information and world culture, which in fact was reflected in the exodus of the Albanians through embassies or land and water borders. The contact they had with the developed world, the high standard of living in other European countries, the culture they had dreamt of, created in them the illusion that no prospective of development could be for their country and that they couldn't live in their country;*
- *The great problems and difficulties related to the transition period increased poverty in a significant number of people, due to the closure of many production factories, whereas the farmers, having restricted investment possibilities, couldn't afford the competition with the foreign market;*
- *The political instability and the disorders of 1997 made the Albanians skeptic on their country's future.*
- *The shortcomings in educational and patriotic formation of past and present generations from too politicized to too insufficient;*
- *The influence of present cosmopolitan tendency on the Albanians. It's worth mentioning that the consequences of such tendency are greater than any other factor.*

All the factors mentioned above with reference to the whole country do influence even on the valley of Shushica. Furthermore, other factors, which may be considered as positive ones, do influence on the spiritual connection of a population to its living place.

- *The rich material and spiritual traditions of Laberia region, which have cultivated in its locals a feeling of pride on their origin and country;*
- *The good level of emancipation in regional population;*

Other negative factors to mention are:

- *The inclusion of the valley in one of the poorest regions of the country, reflected in low personal income and massive immigration;*
- *The accessibility to urban domestic and foreign centers, by land or sea transport means used by the locals to immigrate out of the valley;*

- *As well as Vlora citizens, the valley locals suffered the consequences of year 1997's disorders, fraudulent loan companies etc.*

Questionnaire Results

Of 661 surveyed persons, 430 are proud of being locals of their area, 215 are undecided as they were declared uninterested to this issue, while 16 are ashamed of being locals of their area.

- The majority of 65% is proud of living in the valley of Shushica, that is they continue to preserve a strong spiritual connection to the valley.
- A considerable percentage of 32.5 % is undecided and, depending on the conditions and prospective, is subject to change of opinion and passage on either side.
- The category of those who are ashamed of living in the valley, that is, of those who have completely broken off the connection to their living place is small in number, just the 2.4% of the surveyed persons. However, the existence of such a category tells us a lot and the possibility of future increase is not excluded.

By analyzing the above data we arrive at the conclusion that the spiritual connection of the population to its living place is considerably faded. This is mainly due to the general and specific factors mentioned above with reference to the valley of Shushica. To evidence the causes let us explain what each category represents:

- The first category, i.e. of those being proud of their living place comprises: all of Albanian nationality; 35.1% females and 64.9% males; 6.7% under working-age, 67.9% at working-age and 25.4% above working-age; 80.9% farmers and 19.1% intellectuals; of different educational levels: 1.8% analphabets, 16.4% of elementary education, 20.6% of secondary school education, 44% of high school education and 17.2% of university education; of all marital statuses: 64.6% married, 24.8% single, 9.7% widowers and 0.9% cohabitants; of different income levels: 64.1% under poverty level and only 4.5% above the poverty level; 50.2% fulfill somewhat their cultural needs, 32% do not fulfill their cultural needs while 17.8% fulfill their cultural needs.

As one may notice, any population group can be found in the above category. To be noted is the high percentage of under poverty level group. It indicates the powerful role of affluent patriotic traditions of the valley population with reference to the Laberia region and the whole country.

- The second category, i.e. of those being undecided on the spiritual connection to their living place comprises: all of Albanian nationality; 42.3% females and 57.7% males; 8.3% under working-age, 88.8% at working-age and 2.9% above working-age; 63.2% farmers 14.8% exercise other activities and 22% intellectuals; of

different educational levels: 1.3% analphabets, 6.5% of elementary education, 24.1% of secondary school education, 47.9% of high school education and 20.2% of university education; of all marital statuses: 62.3% married, 24.8% single, 2.3% widowers and 1.5% cohabitants; of different income levels: 64.1% under poverty level 29.7% at the poverty level and only 6.2% above the poverty level; 42.9% fulfill somewhat their cultural needs, 39.5% do not fulfill their cultural needs while 17.8% fulfill their cultural needs. It is clear that the above category comprises even those who are not fond of their living place; in fact they make up 16.8% of said category, while the rest of 83.2% are still fond of their living place.

As one may notice, any population group can be found in the above category. To be noted is the high percentage of under poverty level group, although above poverty level group is not missing. It is also impressive the high percentage of high school and university education persons. It indicates the great uncertainty related to the patriotic feelings with reference to the Laberia region and the whole country due to the powerful influence of the above factors and conditions.

- The third category, i.e. of those being ashamed of their living place comprises a 2.3%. As we mentioned above, the existence of such a category tells us a lot and the possibility of future increase is not excluded. The category in question comprises: all of Albanian nationality; 56.2% females and 43.8% males; 62.5% under working-age, and none above working-age; all farmers and no intellectuals; of different educational levels: 6.2% analphabets, 25% of elementary education, 25% of secondary school education, 43.8% of high school education and none of university education; of two kinds of marital statuses: 12.5% married, 87.5% single; of different income levels: 87.5% under poverty level 2.5% at poverty level and none above the poverty level; 25.1% fulfill somewhat their cultural needs, 56.2% do not fulfill their cultural needs while 18.7% fulfill their cultural needs. It is comprehensible for this category to have declared as not being fond of their living place.

Conclusions

Commenting the above data, we note as follows:

- The questionnaire includes the majority of valley population groups;
- The majority are young people, under the working-age, who, due to their short life experience and lack of proper school, family or social education, have non spiritual connection to their living area.
- It is comprehensible the absence of elderly people in the third category. By living and working in hard conditions and knowing deeply the material and social

traditions of the region, they have created strong connections to their living place;

- To be noted is the significant number of high school educated people, undoubtedly due to deficiencies in the domestic educational system;
- Naturally, this category includes people at or under the poverty level. It refers to the powerful role of the economical factor on this great problem;
- The presence of those declaring the fulfillment of their cultural needs in their living place, as the possibilities for such a fulfillment are very restricted, shows the narrow-mindedness of these people on the issue.

Whereas the presence of the second category refers to the fading of the population's spiritual connection to the valley, such a category shows that the process has become deeper.

This is due to many factors, among which to be mentioned is the significant confusion created in these people with the systems' change and the great difficulties of the transition period. This category of people has lost the hope and impetus for a better life; it gets unmotivated in the effort to improve the living conditions and environment, to know and embrace the material and spiritual traditions of the valley and of the entire country. In these circumstances, it negates and despises anything of national value by embracing foreign cosmopolitan living styles. It is part of certain mentalities, nationally and internationally speaking, that clearly represent the flattening and unification of the great and desirable diversity of those material and spiritual values that each world region or country possesses, and on the loss of which, the scholars have set the alarm.

Recommendations

- This great national problem should concern all local and central institutions, politicians and executives, teachers, educators, etc.
- On this issue detailed studies should be carried out in the entire country and in different periods of time so as to trace the origin of said problem.
- On the basis of these detailed studies short-term and long-term strategies should be formulated along with concrete working programs so as to impede the further deepening of such a phenomenon with heavy consequences on many aspects: national, social, psychological and economical. Conditions should be created that this category of people consciously changes its attitude toward its living place and establishes the steady spiritual connection to its living place.
- The new strategy should be aimed at: prevention of future exodus and village abandonment by using the valuable and unrepeatable resources and by creating

the best conditions to perform diverse and profit-making activities, which may assure a steady development, protection and regeneration of the area.

- Space and sector economical priorities should be set on the basis of a scientific use of natural and human resources. Further more the area should be integrated in the future district of production and processing of agricultural and farming products for the communes of Vlora district. This would be a motivation to improve the life in the entire region and country.

These were some conclusions and recommendations following the analysis of the above questionnaire results for the valley of Shushica. It is of great importance the research on this important issue. Meanwhile the conclusions and recommendations will be a reference point to the comparison of the available data with those of future questionnaires and analyses for the valley of Shushica, as well as for other regions of our country.

Bibliography

1. *Krutaj, F., Gaçe, B., Abazi, H., " Vlora, the southern port of Adriatic sea", Tirana 2004, page 31, Toena*
2. *Aliaj Sh. Features of Albanian tectonic structure (1998), Geographical Studies, no.3*
3. *Same as*
4. *Hydro-metrology Institution. The Albanian Climate (rainfall manual), (1975) Tirana*
5. *Land Study Institution, The Albanian Land Map, (1999) Tirana*
6. *Vlora District profile, Tirana 2003, page 30, Toena*