

TYPES OF MARRIAGES AND PANAGJYR IN VILLAGES OF KUMANOVO

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Abstract

Albanians have been described as an endogamous tribe for their way of life with canonical norms and codes, which, although long have been neglected, have a continuity that today appears as relics, since they have dictated the organization of life for a long time. Although it is a matter of remnants, the canon has been respected by Albanian society, without understanding that it is a historical flow conceived as a tradition, which becomes a point of national identity. In the context of tradition in certain areas, as is the case with the research in Kumanovo, we have focused on understanding the historical and cultural flow and the specifics of the villages of this region.¹ Searching the specifics and the canon as a remnant, we focused on marriages, more precisely on the types of marriages, how it is conceived by the inhabitants, how this has changed over the years and certain periods, which also brought us to the so-called *panagjyr*.

Keywords: marriage, endogamous, with a change, sorority, levirate, panagjyr.

Introduction

The organization of life and the functioning within families, as well as in Albanian society as a whole, have long been shaped by the norms of the Kanun. Viewed within their historical context, these norms were reasonable for the circumstances in which Albanians lived. Today, one can speak of remnants of the Kanun, without fully recognizing that it represents a historical continuum, conceptualized as tradition, which has become a cornerstone of national identity. Likewise, it should be understood that these remnants, within a historical flow, also constitute elements of cultural identity.

In this context, marriages should also be examined, bearing in mind that they reflect the historical and social conditions of a country across different periods.

Prohibition of Endogamous Marriage

Marriage is considered an institution, defined from a traditional perspective as follows: “Marriage is the lifelong union of a man and a woman, for the purpose of having children, raising them, and supporting one another in the work of everyday life” (Frano I. 2019). This traditional concept has not changed even in modern society (Rini U. 2022); however, the issue lies in another customary (kanun-based) definition which, interestingly, has persisted for a longer time in the villages of Kumanovo compared to other regions, and it can be said that it still exists today. This is the prohibition of marriages within the same village, regardless of whether the individuals belong to the same clan or not.² Thus, the inhabitants of Zllakuçane do

¹ Field research provides concrete data by focusing on issues of ethnological and cultural significance within a given region, as was the case with the research conducted in the villages of Kumanovo (first in 2010 and later in 2025/2026). In recent studies, the focus has been on customary (kanun-based) norms related to marriage, identifying several types or forms of marriages that existed in earlier periods in this region. The aim of this study is to distinguish the specific characteristics of marriages in the villages of Kumanovo, as well as what differentiates them from or connects them to those of Albanians in other regions.

² Villages in the Kumanovo region where endogamous marriage is prohibited include: Goshince, Orizare, Llojane, Vaksince, Sllupcane, Orkoc, Zllakucane, and Shtraz. In contrast, marriage within the village is practiced in Mateç and Hotël.

not intermarry with nearby villages such as Bellanoc, Shtrazë, and Stançiç, because they are considered to belong to the same clan, namely the Gash clan (*fisi*). This village is divided into two neighborhoods: Upper Zllakuçane and Lower Zllakuçane. In Lower Zllakuçane, the Duhanve quarter is settled, whose residents are not related by clan to those of the Upper neighborhood, nevertheless, they do not marry within the village.

This sense of closeness and connection among the inhabitants of a village has also been observed by Serbian scholars, who generalize the phenomenon as follows: “Among Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, there exists another endogamous prohibition—namely, the restriction of marital ties within the same village, even when the inhabitants belong to different clans, brotherhoods, or kinship groups. Today, this prohibition is more widespread in smaller villages, whereas in larger settlements it is not strictly observed. The pronounced prohibition of marriage within the same village, as commonly stated, is due to neighborly relations. Among inhabitants with patriarchal characteristics, neighborliness creates a sense of spiritual kinship” (Jovan T. 2013). This connection and spiritual closeness is also recounted by a man, namely someone displaced from another village (resident of the village of Llojan): *when I came/ I was going to work on a field/ but as I was passing nearby an old man who was working with his girls/ there was a man with four girls and he was working with those girls/ I didn't know the order when I came// and I passed by// he was calling me to stop, good boy/ and I stopped/ why don't you say work well/ where do I know/ I don't know here/ you should say work well to us// like you said work well to your cousins up there/ have you said work well to your cousins up there/ but I've never passed by without saying them work well / you should use it the same way with us///*³

The Kanun provides precise rules regarding the prohibitions of endogamous marriage. The restrictions that do not permit engagement or marriage are as follows:

- a) the couple must not be related by blood or kinship;
- b) they must not belong to the same clan;
- c) they must not belong to the clan into which the boy intends to marry;
- d) the woman must not be previously married (i.e., divorced or “given away”);
- e) there must be no spiritual kinship (kumari/godparenthood).

As can be seen, the prohibitions on endogamous marriages in the Kanun do not refer to relationships outside the tribe, but we find it in the largest number of Albanian villages. The anthropologist Berit Backer, this kind of marriage will describe as: “There are no prescribed partners for marriage, but exogamy is practiced. This rule applies in theory to the localized lineage, but is usually extended to the whole village community when different kinship groups are settled in the same place. This is recognized as a social paradox, as the rule should apply to the ‘blood’ only. Marriage prohibitions also embrace maternal kin to the seventh grade. In practice this means that a son or a daughter cannot marry any close maternal relative, *dajët*” (Berit B. 2003).

The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini is even stricter regarding those who violate these customary norms, prescribing severe punishments:

“The Kanun does not permit engagement or marriage when the aforementioned prohibitions intervene, even if the kinship extends to four hundred generations. If someone violates these prohibitions, their own clan punishes them, and it may even go so far as to burn their house”.⁴

³ *kur kum ardh une/ po shkoj me punu te ni arë/ amo pe kapërcej ni plak po punon me çika/ kish pas njo katër çika edhe ai vet t'u punu me ato çikat/ une hala frik jam s'pe di renin// edhe kalova// po m'thirr nalu bre gjali mirë/ dhe u nala/ pse ti s' thu puna mār/ ku me dit une/ s'pe di ktu/ ti duhesh me na thon puna mār// qysh ju ke thon kusherive tu atje nalt puna mār/ a u ke thon kusherive puna mār atje nalt/ po kurr s'kam kalu pa ju thon puna mār/ edhe neve ashtu duhesh ta përdorsh///* Interview from research conducted in the village of Llojane, Kumanovo (October, 2025), by the Department of History research group of the Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of the Albanians - Skopje.

⁴ Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit, <https://shorturl.at/cB8cy>

In the villages of the Kumanovo region, there have been cases of marriages within the same village; however, such situations were usually resolved by the family leaving the village, which was considered a source of shame for the entire community⁵.

Exchange marriage (Marriage by swapping daughters)

The issue of prohibiting endogamous marriages has been more pronounced in mountainous villages. This was often addressed through the so-called *exchange marriage*, by establishing ties with other Albanian villages. This type of marital arrangement is also recognized in customary law. Thus, in the *Kanun of Skanderbeg* (Frano I. 2019), this form of marriage is referred to as *tramkazim* or the exchange of daughters, and is explained as follows: “The exchange of daughters occurs when two households reach an agreement to give and take daughters: ‘Give me your daughter for my son, and I will give you my daughter for your son’ (Frano I. 2019). This type of marriage was widespread in many Albanian-inhabited regions, also serving to preserve ethnic continuity by ensuring that marital ties were formed with specific Albanian villages.

Even today, many marriages in the villages of the Kumanovo area involve two or more sisters marrying two or more brothers. The reason is often practical: families say they already know the in-laws, trust them, and thus arrange for another daughter to marry into the same family.

Types of marriage – levirate and sororate

The research also identified certain types of marriages that stand in contrast to customary law, and which may be considered as influence or intrusions from other cultures, given the long-standing contact and interaction with neighboring peoples. These include *levirate*, and more rarely, *sororate*.

Levirate is a form of non-traditional marriage and is regarded as a taboo topic in our society, as it does not align with the collective mentality and contradicts the principles of customary law, which have historically regulated social life. Notably, there is no specific term for this practice in the Albanian language. It refers to the marriage of a man to the widow of his deceased brother, whether she has or not children. In everyday conversation, people refer to it as “*a kthy*” (meaning “she has returned”), implying that the widow has little or have no choice, as otherwise she would have to return to her parental home.⁶

This practice has generally not been widely condemned; on the contrary, even when the younger brother resisted marrying his deceased brother’s widow, strong social pressure was often exerted by the community, leading some to accept such marriages. These cases mainly belong to earlier generations. In one example recounted, the couple eventually formed a family and raised children together.

Sororate, on the other hand, refers to the marriage of a widower to the sister of his deceased wife. Typically, this involved a notable age difference, as the younger, unmarried sister would be given in marriage to the widower. These forms of marriage have persisted in some cases, resulting in the formation of new families through remarriage.

Marriage by payment and marriage by elopement

Marriage by payment existed until about 60 years ago. In this region, there is no specific term for it, but in other areas it is referred to as “*marriage with honor*,” implying a payment made in recognition of the daughter’s honor.

⁵ Data related to specific individuals or villages are not disclosed for reasons of privacy.

⁶ Ali Dalipi (retired ophthalmologist), born in 1958 in the village of Zllakuçane. Interview conducted on December 12, 2025.

Marriage by elopement usually occurred when the girl's family did not approve of the young man or his family. With the consent of the girl, she would run away and join the boy's household. In some cases, such situations led to violence, including the wounding or even killing of the young man, and more rarely, the girl. However, today attitudes have become more liberal, and in many instances, the girl's family eventually reconciles and accepts the marriage after some time.

Panagjyr – Night marriage in the villages of Kumanovo

In Albanian folk tradition, it has generally not been customary to take a bride at night without a wedding ceremony and established rituals. However, many traditions have changed under the influence of political and state systems, often conflicting with practices followed by the people for centuries. In this context, we encounter a period referred to as *panagjyr/panagjir*, (Ismail F. B. 2022) found in the villages of the Kumanovo region. This phenomenon presents difficulties in determining its exact timeframe and the reasons behind the emergence of this new form of marriage, which had not previously existed.

Panagjiri, refers to a form of marriage carried out within 24 hours⁷, without traditional wedding ceremonies, based solely on an agreement between the men of both families.

The exact period and reasons for this practice cannot be definitively established; however, some accounts have been preserved through oral tradition. According to Mirushe S. Asllani, daughter of Ramiz Selmani from the village of Llojane, who lived to the age of 109, *panagjiri* occurred “during the time of the Bulgarians,” when, as she recounts, “the Bulgarians were taking our girls, so people were forced to marry their daughters in secrecy.” Similar accounts have been shared by other elderly individuals, although they cannot be substantiated with concrete evidence.

More credible data, supported by a larger number of interviewees, suggests that this practice dates to the period of the communist system. Ismail Bilalli, in his monograph “Vaksınca nëpër shekuj”, refers to this phenomenon as “marriages of underage girls” and cites specific individuals who married during that time (Ismail F. B. 2022)⁸. The monograph explains that *panagjiri* was linked to a campaign undertaken by the former Yugoslav government, which required girls from the age of 15 to participate in youth labor actions in Belgrade. This was considered unacceptable by the Albanian population, as it was seen to endanger the moral integrity of their daughters. As a result, families sought immediate solutions by marrying off their daughters at a young age, often in a discreet manner. These marriages typically took place at night, with the girl's father sending her to the groom's household, often without her having any real say in the matter and sometimes without knowing the groom well, though prior agreements between the families were in place. In such circumstances, arrangements were easier if one daughter had already married into a family, allowing another sister or relative to marry into the same household.⁹ One interviewee referred to this type of union as “*martesa nate*”(night marriages)¹⁰ something previously unknown in tradition. Given the circumstances of the time, this form of marriage was seen as justified, as girls were being summoned to join

⁷ In this context, however, the term acquires a distinct meaning unrelated to that of a fair. It is used to refer to an agreement for the marriage of two young people, arranged by the male members of the families, without any of the traditional wedding rites.

⁸ The author was a teacher in this village, and, as he states, he collected the data from fellow villagers approximately 40 years ago.

⁹ Interview conducted on March 22, 2010, by Bukuriye Mustafa and Ganimete Ramadani.

¹⁰ Mirushe Selmani Asllani, a teacher at the central primary school “Rilindja” in Llojane–Vaksince. Interview conducted by Bukuriye Mustafa on November 13, 2025..

the Yugoslav Youth Work Actions. In one recounted case, a married woman had received such a summons, but her marriage spared her from participation.

One of the interviewees described this type of marriage as something that had never occurred before. Given the circumstances of the time, this form of marriage was considered reasonable, as girls were being summoned to participate in the Yugoslav Youth Work Actions—a situation that had affected one now-married woman, and from which this marriage had effectively spared her¹¹ (Ismail F.B. 2022). In addition, there was the obstacle of very young age, which did not legally allow them to marry; however, the local registrar would increase their recorded age (Ismail F.B. 2022) in order to help them overcome the situation.

This form of marriage is described by the researcher of this region, Mumin Zeqiri, as follows: “Quite simply, the two parties would reach an agreement—whoever had a son or a girl ready for marriage—and they would arrange the union in a simple manner. The girl would be taken by cart during the night, and the next morning she would wake up in her husband’s home, without any prior formalities. A considerable number of marriages were conducted in this way during that short period in the Kumanovo area”.

According to Mumin Zeqiri, *panagjiri* took place after the Second World War, around the years 1952–1954, during the communist regime. He links the circumstances and reasons for such marriages to several state, economic, and social processes that were unacceptable to this segment of the population:

“When the Yugoslav authorities decided to include women in agricultural cooperatives and removed their veil, regardless of age, the population reacted. In order to avoid sending marriageable-age girls to these cooperatives, families urgently organized marriages—some within two or three days. This undertaking was called *panagjyr*, conveying the idea of an organized event, similar to fairs or other collective arrangements, in a sense resembling a form of ‘exchange’ or ‘transaction’¹². Under such conditions, agreements made by male family members, without conditions, effectively legitimized these marriages. This became a way of protecting family honor, by marrying the girl without performing any of the traditional wedding rites or ceremonies, since married women were not included in cooperative labor actions. However, it is clear that *panagjyr*, even as a term, carries a somewhat derogatory connotation in relation to the traditional values of this community”.

Excerpts from interviews (field research conducted in 2010): Most conversations were held with older women about their marriages and customs. A number of them reported that they had been married through *panagjyr*. This was the first time the researcher had encountered the term, and it was understood simply as a different form of marriage, distinct from traditional ones.

One interviewee, who had been married through the mediation of a relative to a man from her cousin’s husband’s family, explained briefly:

*My uncel’s daughter was here she took me to her brother-in-law/ we were nearby/ nothing/ we went to panagjyr/ we came at night/ there was no wedding at all/ nothing/ no clothes///*¹³

¹¹ “After some time, following our marriage at the girl’s home in Sllupçane, they had sent her a summons to join the Yugoslav Youth Action. The girl’s father told them that she had been married in Vaksince. They did not believe him, but they asked for the marriage certificate”.

¹² Interview with Mumin Zeqiri, April 5 and 26, 2019.

¹³ *jo mori çika e mixhës u kan ktune/ m’ka marr për gjal kunati/ çe çaty ngat jena kon vela hiç/ darsëm n’panagjyr/ natën kena ardh/ hiç as darsëm/ as kurrjë/ as petka///* Rabie Aliu, f. Mateç. Interview conducted on April 22, 2010, by Ganimete Jashari and Bukuriye Mustafa.

Panagjiri in Presheva

As part of the geographical region of Karadak, and having lived under the same socialist political system, the same phenomenon was also present in Presheva¹⁴.

Xhemaledin Rexhepi from Presheva notes that this period is likewise known there by the term “*pangjyr*,” and it is often used in conversation as a temporal reference point for events—before, during, or after the *panagjyr*.

This period belongs to the time of the Yugoslav socialist system, when, as he describes it, the “veil” was removed (referring to the head covering, around the 1950s), and rumors spread that Serbs would take Albanian girls. Out of fear, Albanian families began marrying their daughters at a very young age, around 14–15 years old. It is also said that during this time, even elderly men married very young girls.¹⁵

Theoretical approach to the prohibition of endogamous marriages

Differences in lifestyle, social organization, and cultural practices across many villages in the Kumanovo region reflect an endogamous mode of living, structured around clans and villages, while maintaining continuity in respecting customary (kanun-based) norms. This represents a survival mechanism within a society that has functioned for centuries and is resistant to change. These groups have their own organizational norms, including the prohibition of endogamous marriage in most villages of the Kumanovo region. Such a norm has existed in many Albanian villages, but notably, it has persisted longer in this particular region. Even today, there are cases where marriages within the same village are prohibited, or even where individuals share a common origin. Those who have dared to violate this prohibition have sometimes faced severe consequences, including injury or expulsion from the village.

The widespread nature of this prohibition among Albanians may be better understood through the perspective of anthropologist Franz Boas. One explanation relates to the idea of “purity”¹⁶ (Franz B. 2025), which Boas refers to as racial purity—though in this context it is better understood as clan-based or ethnic purity. The second explanation is cultural: Boas emphasizes cultural factors as even more significant, suggesting they can fully account for observed differences (Franz B. 2025). The notion of ethnic continuity is reflected in the fact that marriages—especially in mountainous Albanian villages—were arranged exclusively with other Albanian villages, and not with villages of different ethnic backgrounds, even if they shared the same religious affiliation (e.g., Muslim).

Conclusions

The Kumanovo region, from an ethnographic perspective, is distinctive in terms of marriage practices, which, in their traditional and cultural continuity, are closely intertwined with elements of customary law (the Kanun). In this context, the issue of marriage is approached within a historical timeframe, as it has evolved across different periods.

A number of interviews refer to earlier times and forms of marriage that existed in the past but are no longer practiced today. These accounts are mainly provided by older generations, who recount either their own experiences or what they have heard from their elders. Such forms of marriage represent deviations from the traditional wedding-based union.

¹⁴ Before the establishment of the state border, Kumanovo maintained more frequent marital ties with Presheva..

¹⁵ Xhemaledin Rexhepi, a retired professor of the Albanian language, recounted that he also had a close relative who was married through *panagjyr*.

¹⁶ “When social groups are organized along ethnic lines, we encounter a similar tendency toward endogamy, with the aim of preserving ethnic purity”.

The Kanun forbids marriages within the blood clan up to the 7th generation, whether on father's or the mother's side, but not with those who have no kinship ties. Exchange marriage (*marriage by swapping daughters*) was a widely practiced form, especially in mountainous villages, not only in Kumanovo but in other regions as well. Levirate and sororate marriages, on the other hand, are viewed as external influences that penetrated Albanian culture.

Marriage by elopement and marriage by payment are also noted, the latter said to have disappeared around the 1960s. Another distinct type of marriage is *panagjyr*, associated with the communist period. According to field data, this phenomenon appears to have been limited to the Kumanovo and Presheva regions and is not found in other Albanian-inhabited areas of North Macedonia.

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Mirushe Selmani Asllani. Interview conducted on November 13, 2025.

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