

## **CHAMBERS WERE THE PLACE WHERE MEN MADE IMPORTANT DECISIONS TO DECIDE THE FATE OF THE NATION**

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### **Abstract**

It was not only due to the nice Albanian tradition of hospitality, but also due to several other reasons that the presence of this special gathering in the Albanian people's culture, recognized in various regions as "Statesmen's chamber", "the council of the wise men", "the decent council", became of indispensable need. It was in this council that the guests of miscellaneous levels and degrees were hosted and welcomed, the generations were educated, the conflicts and feuds among families or within the village were properly addressed and resolved.

Considering the functions of this council and the Albanian aspiration to manifest a strong sense of family as crucial to their culture, the process of settling or projecting this council's building demanded that it be situated in a safe and well-protected location within a dwelling-house; therefore, there was a great attention shown with respect to its furnishing in line and perfect harmony with the common traditional tastes pertaining to the various Albanian regions.

*Keywords:* wise men, guests' room, council of conflict resolution, etc.

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### **1. Introduction**

In the history of the Albanians and especially of the highlands and autonomous provinces, as long as the governments were powerless and weak to protect, solve and develop the problems of these provinces, the highlanders found as a solution their chambers, places where wise men debated and these places turned out to be places for conflict resolution.

Men's Chambers, due to the special historical conditions in the Albanian territories, lived long and still live today, enriched with new elements that adapt to changes and new civilization developments. The men's chamber was a right, part of an ancient code that had to be respected and enforced for the decisions that was made.

Men's chambers were the oldest forms of organization of Albanians, operating on the basis of customary law and which was a necessary need of the local population to survive, to preserve their freedom, language and customs, a form of opposition and resistance to the state and foreign law and as an expression of autonomy and self-government.

The men's chambers had an original, national character and with great influence on the local population. In the absence of the state and its coercive mechanisms, the assemblies in the men's chambers, had elaborated their forms of communication. These forms were collective, such as assemblies, judgments of elders, force of public or individual opinion, blood feuds, etc.

In the men's chambers, conflicts, engagements, marriages, deaths and even national ones were resolved, such as uprisings and wars, when these provinces were endangered by foreign occupation.

### **1. Organization and role of men's chambers in the reception of the friend.**

Men's chambers in our highlands had a special significance and role. They have played an extraordinary role especially when any kind of information was lacking. The men's chambers were the meeting place of the "Council of the Wise", the "Council of the Elders", the "Wise Men", the "Earthlings", the representatives of the men of the highlands, who together with other members made important decisions for resolving disputes, to face the enemy and defend the homeland. Chambers have also acted as social institutions.

Like every nation in the world, Albanians have their own customs. Among the most prominent customs in Albania are hospitality and trust. The hospitality was related not only to the reception of the friend at home, he was served with everything he may need such as (food, drinks, family equipment, etc.), regardless of his economic situation. Exactly, the custom of hospitality had become a cult when someone from outside shouted: "O lord of the house", the door opened immediately and each member of the family showed the hospitality with the expression "welcome" or "order inside" (generous). And so the Albanian's house, according to his worldview, had to be open day and night, both to the known friend and to the unknown travelers. For this mentality in all Albanian provinces every house had a special place for friends.

Albanians have been fascinated in the construction and design of their homes not only for housing but also for protection. The distribution of dwellings and especially towers was related in accordance with the terrain and its strategic importance. They in many cases of historical events have turned into invincible castles. The towers and dwellings of the Albanians were not just residential environments but also a symbol of the protection of freedom, thus taking on a social character. Towers and dwellings preserved a great value not only in the field of building architecture, but also a great cultural wealth. In general, the Albanian apartments had well-defined facilities. They were especially famous for the architecture of the construction of "men's rooms", "guest rooms", "good room", etc., which was the most important part of the apartment. The size of these rooms was large (about 30-40 m<sup>2</sup>) and their position in the apartment was quite convenient compared to other facilities. This was the most beautiful room that the apartment of every Albanian family had. Even her equipment was given much greater care than any other environment. The room was lined with mutaf and tapestries skillfully crafted by weaving women, on which sheepskin mugs were placed. The room had in the center a chimney with a plate decorated with carvings, where their main motive was the patriotic one, such as: pines, stars, tight hands that expressed faith, eagles, flags, etc. Next to the chimney was placed the tray with cups (about 24 pieces), several types of coffee pots and kettles. In the middle of the room was placed the round table, where food was served. At the end of the chamber was the ledge where rifles and various musical instruments hung. The inside room was decorated with artistic wood carvings, especially the ceiling, doors, window shutters, cupboards and shelves placed on the wall, shelves, etc.

In these chambers were gathered not only the men of the fist but according to the importance of the friend, also from the village and the province. There began the conversation about the troubles of the homeland and the province, about bravery, talked about the land, the motherland and its future and were listened to with great respect by young and old. The conversation in the men's chambers was slow. The men took turns leaving each other. He who spoke was listened to with attention and respect. Thoughts were given by speaking briefly, in turn, and always honoring the elderly. Interrupting the conversation, except for a brief reply, was disliked. The

debate was strong and about important problem, but it did not become open. With their allegorical character and wisdom, the meseletes were also an expression of self-control and spiritual despair in cases of conflict and difficult situations.

In the chambers, the men stood cross-legged, unsupported, in a dignified manner. It was a sign of sitting culture and respect for all men's dance. A careless attitude would not be tolerated and became the object of ridicule. Men's rooms were honored places, they often were considered as room of the friends where they were served with coffee, tobacco and other drinks.

According to the rules set out in customary law, in the right corner stood the most distant friend, regardless of his age or social position. Then in nearest positions stood the other friends, sorted by age and authority they enjoyed. To the left of the chimney sat the head of the family, who was always very attentive, taking care of it and was obliged to prepare coffee in the presence of friends. To entertain friends and other guests, in addition to various conversations, melodies of songs ("chamber songs") and the sounds of folk dances were often played in these chambers. Especially in Northern Albania, the "men's rooms" (friends), were important hearths where the songs of the saints were sung. In these chambers was also taught the story of the first to be unable to teach it in schools. In the men's chamber, important issues of war, life, work, pride for the victory or resistance of Albanians were discussed.

## **2. Men's Chambers, the place of the allegory of the highlanders.**

The men's room in our country has a special importance and has played an extraordinary role especially when any kind of information was lacking. They were medals of bravery for the warrior; they experienced the event, the hero or shamefully stigmatized the coward and the traitor. In the rooms events have always taken precedence. In these environments, the debate was heated, the events, the characters were discussed and very important vital decisions were made for the fate of the homeland.

Chambers are created to follow the story step by step. Certainly some of them have lost their way and importance, such as those for Skanderbeg, the Albanian League of Prizren, the Anti-Fascist War or the resolution of local issues, provincial forgiveness, bloodshed and the nationwide trust. These chambers in different historical periods have had as important themes the struggle of our people for freedom and independence, for the protection of honor and dignity, excellent patriotism, endurance and efforts to protect the lands, customs, language and national culture. Very important decisions were made in the chambers by the Council of Elders, the council of sages, the Sailors, etc., for the fate of Albania.

The conversations in the chamber were described by the idea: "that there is no freedom without blood", "that the enemy wants a bullet", "that the enemy does not become a friend", that "to win you need unity", that betrayal is the bad seed that sprouts increases slavery" etc. The patriotic message has come through the legends that were discussed in these chambers. The chambers provided extensive historical information, which is why they were called the "living chronicle" of the Albanian people's struggles for freedom and independence. The men in the chambers dealt with the events in detail, images and details of the war, the proportions of the warring forces, the strategies and tactics of the popular war, the emotional attitude, etc.

"The enemy is invading our mountains, the enemy has broken through the door, but the towers are not given, the general struggle is not happiness, without a free homeland."

Irony and allegory have always been present in men's rooms. Along with the glory that the hero wore to the people, he satirized and unmasked the betrayal, sang the anthem of heroism, but also ridiculed the cowards, the intriguers, the people with two faces and many flags. They took off their white hats and put on their black hats. The bearers of allegories (wise men) went from room to room, from mexhelis to mexhelis, from assembly to assembly, to weddings and sorrows, anytime and anywhere, and led the conversation by activating old issues and improvising new ones. In the development and enrichment of matters a great role has been

played by the "men's chambers", always open to the friend and the traveler. The issues educated the people especially the younger generation, with patriotic traditions and high moral virtues, with the love for the nation and the homeland, for freedom and democracy, prosperity, with the love for the national language and culture. They sharpened judgment and developed independent thinking, perfected the culture of brainstorming. The theme of these allegorical stories of wise men is very wide and varied, covering every sphere of life. In these stories in the "guest rooms" wide and rich social themes stood out, all kinds of relationships between different groups and strata are affected, down to family relations between husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, father and son.

The national question also had a special place in allegorical stories. Rich and high-level, are also those stories that reflect economic relations. In many of them, the bearers of the allegory in the "rooms of friends", treated both aesthetic and moral problems, as well as the place that occupies the right and the wrong in society, beautiful and ugly, tragedy and comics, etc. Wise men with the allegorical character of conversations and their wisdom were also expressions of self-control, spiritual balance of the people in cases of conflict and difficult situations. In these environments the "Councils of the Elders", the "Councils of the Wise" and the "Dhetars" did not allow banalities and vulgarities. There were no direct insults in any of the cases, although their significance could be very poignant. Insulting a friend was not particularly allowed, which was seen as a serious violation of tradition and canonical norms.

The issues could not continue even for a long time in the conversation. Allegorical compositions were used in these cases. To get an idea, about this way of use, we are giving an allegorical composition, developed in a Dibra ode.

We are briefly telling the circumstances. It was about falling to the enemy. Some were for an armed uprising, but there were also those who preached in the ode the spirit of submission, arguing that a war in those circumstances would bring more serious consequences for the people.

The allegorical composition of the wise men began with an attack against these men. The issue carries the message that all bridges of reconciliation with the enemy had been broken. I quote:

"Once a man takes God and makes a snake a friend. Every day he would bring him a cup of tami (milk) and take from him a gold napoleon. One day one of the men's sons passes by the snake. He hits them with a stone and cuts off their tails. The boy dies because the snake bites him in the finger. The father bury the son the vessel went to the serpent with the tami cup. As soon as the snake comes out, the man throws a stone at her head. When the serpent was dead, she said to her husband:

- How, you are not maintaining friendship?!

The man says: "Your tail is cut off; my son on earth, there is no friendship between us!"

The allegory in the chamber is clear. They express the tragic fate that Albania has had, conquered for centuries. He found it occupied and in the XX century. Almost until the middle of the twentieth century, foreign invasions replaced each other and used their laws in our lands. Poverty, lawlessness and injustice have run through these invasions. Having in general no modern Albanian state for a historically long time, lacking constitutions and civil and criminal codes, the people themselves have made these constitutions and codes, which they have called canons, such as the Kanun of Skanderbeg, the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini and other canons of the North and South. The place of creation of the Albanian customary law were the chambers, which in different Albanian provinces receive different names such as: "ode of men", "ode of friends", "ode of good", "chamber of songs", etc.

The tolerance and understanding of the Albanians has deep roots in the history and internal organization of the highlands themselves, in the way of administering these territories, customs, hospitality and generosity, in the chambers. Chambers are not merely facilities of hospitality,

but facilities where wise men, assembled and gave solutions to problems of national importance, when the homeland was in danger, made trusts, reconciled bloodshed and resolved conflicts. The traditions and customs of the ancients, especially when it came to the protection of the homeland, the father left to the son as a will carved in marble on the chimney slab, in rhapsodic verses:

"Son, let me forgive you,

Do not stop the enemy's rifle..."

In the Albanian provinces when the country was occupied by the Turks, the canon operated in the unwritten legal form. But as opposition, later, some provinces regulated the relations between them in such a way that this was contrary to the savage laws of the invader and in some directions even the canon and these were called "Kararet e Dheut". "Kararet e Dheut" were unwritten legal decisions, to these decisions they were forced to submit without any conditions such as minority and pariah. On the basis of the principle of the Kanun of LekëDukagjini, the exercise of legal right was held by the elders and hammers, who played the main role e.g. the province of Lura, moreover, the right of the landowners, of the representatives of the land, who always play the main role, as the council of elders, but the decisive role, also acted. This can be seen in the fact that when they expressed disagreements even among the elders, in the men's chambers, the landowners were the ones who set the tone for the solution.

The "Earthquakes" have also been a political measure to unite the provinces between them in the fight against the common enemy. They were represented by 12 elders, 12 hammers and 6 landowners. The latter stamped every decision in the men's chambers together with the people of the provinces. Disputes between the council of elders were resolved by the earth assembly, 6 members. The council of elders, which included elders, hammers, and landowners, met in the assembly to settle disputes and quarrels among the villagers. Their decision was called "Earthquake" and had to be rigorously implemented. For the people who broke the "Earthquakes" the action was called "bidad" and taking this epithet there was no guarantee in front of the people as he was hated by all.

Chambers were places of permanent meeting, discussion and reflection between the representatives of the elders of different tribes, were the hotbeds of reconciliation, counseling and discussion, fraternity and judgment, of understanding, tolerance and patriotic education. The elders represented the judge who settled disputes and conflicts. When the quarrel and the conflict were very fierce, the assembly of the elders of the Mountains met. It was a very difficult task to resolve a conflict by the assembly of elders because the armed forces of the two conflicting parties that were present in the assembly were waiting for the results of the assembly and this result could be satisfactory for both parties, reconciliation and conflict took place end. However, when the conflicting parties were not satisfied with the decisions of the assembly, rifles were fired and blood was shed.

### **3. Chambers the place of conflict resolution.**

In the "chambers of men (friends)" reconciliations were made between brothers, between tribes, between provinces, fighting forces were organized to go to the aid of the provinces endangered by the invasion, the news of the distant world was heard, judgments were given on events conflicts, bloodshed was forgiven, the hearts of the Albanian youth were cooked with patriotism, the resistance of the nation was cooked with gunpowder. The expression of these assemblies and very important decisions in the defense of the homeland in the men's chambers is the decision of the unification of the Albanian provinces, to fight against the fragmentation of the Albanian lands during the period of the Albanian League. In addition to these organizations, an indisputable role as organizations of understanding and tolerance have been

the national assembly's organized during the time of the Albanian League of Prizren until the declaration of independence. This attitude is shown by the trip of two of the leaders of the Albanian League of Prizren, Abdyl Frashëri and Iljaz pasha Dibra, to the Dibra chambers.

We are quoting:

"After a long journey to the men's chambers in the province of Dibra, and the support they gave you, the two leaders of the Albanian League, convened in July 1878, the assembly of the League in Qernanica. Debates in the Assembly of Qernanica erupted when Iljaz saw Dibra ask the participants to give up enmity and blood feuds. The reactions of the participants were immediate, but after much debate, the Dibra highlanders accepted the request in principle, but asked for a deadline. The highlanders in the Assembly agreed to pledge for three months, agreed to repeat the pledge at the end of each quarter if the danger of war had not passed, but refused to enter into the pledge indefinitely because the Kanun of the Dibra Mountains did not allow it. The new promise to stop the bloodshed, according to the custom, could not be concluded without the expiration of the previous trust. The new murders, the very fresh spiritual pain caused to the families of Dibra by the blood feud, often made it difficult to repeat the faith in Dibra. In these critical moments, in the face of the danger of the fragmentation of the homeland, the forgiveness of bloodshed was definitely required, therefore the intervention of the patriot Abdyl Frashëri in the debate was very important, decisive and convincing. According to customary law, despite the fact that non-Dibran personalities were not allowed to participate in the assemblies of Dibra, the weight of Abdyl Frashëri's speech persuaded the Dibrans gathered in the assembly to renounce the force of custom and the laws of the Kanun of the Mountains and accept to bind the Besa. This unanimous attitude of the people of Dibra in the assembly is brought not only by the memories of the elders of Dibra, various documents and sources, but especially the memories of Abdyl Frashëri in which he writes:

"I was in Debar, in front of a crowd of more than 10 thousand people, who were listening to me. I gave them a long speech on the miserable situation of Albania, the dangers that threatened them and its future. I told them that this future depended on our union, on the union of our forces... But I shouted: How do you want to fight against the enemies of the homeland, when you are mortal enemies with each other? Behold, you are gathered here to make a decision of great importance and you are armed to the teeth, but you do not keep the weapons to be used nobly for the defense of our beloved homeland, but to draw the bowels to the brothers your. O brothers! Only by forgetting and throwing behind every feeling of revenge, only by becoming brothers, can you make safe the life of our common mother, Albania" .... "Today it is necessary to forget the hostilities and to publicly forgive the insults." Today, when the enemy wants to drink our blood, today we must fight for freedom and not against each other."

Abdyl Frashëri reminded the highlanders that "everyone has a homeland and a canon. The homeland, was created by nature, or the canon, which was made by people. How do you say men? "... Having said these words, about 10 thousand men gathered in the Assembly, as a single man, dropped their weapons to the ground so that the mountains shook and as it came out of a single mouth only a rumble was heard (single voice):

"Forgive the blood for this faith!

Blood forgive and besa-besa "

After this oath, all the participants shook hands with the blood and embraced the other brotherly. As we noted above, when the fate of the homeland was at stake, the highlanders rose above the laws, over customary rights, and obeyed the decisions made in the "chambers of assembly" in the "chambers of men."

In conclusion we can say that:

Although paler due to new socio-economic conditions, the beautiful habit of hospitality continues to be maintained. Hospitality rituals again continue to be performed in some provinces where the premises of the men's rooms are still preserved intact.

In some Albanian provinces again to this day, in the chambers of highland men are preserved the role played by the councils of elders, councils of sages, landowners, etc., for resolving conflicts and reconciling bloodshed by them when the law and canon fail to sort them out.

Despite the many changes that the Albanian society has undergone, the talks are still preferred to take place only in the men's rooms. Thus, these environments continue to maintain their importance, to remain, "state", "office" very important even in today's life of some areas of the Albanian highlands for conflict resolution.

#### 4. Conclusions

Men's chambers have lived long and continue to live when it comes to resolving conflicts, social or political problems, as long as the authorities are powerless to resolve them.

Men's chambers were the places where the fates of a province or nationwide were gathered and decided when they were endangered by foreign occupation. Blood feuds were settled in the men's wards, as an offspring of the gender order. In the men's chambers also engagements, marriages, deaths and other rituals were made. They operated in such a way that tried to preserve the rituals were decided engagements, marriages, deaths for the benefit of the population of these provinces where they operated, preserving the rituals of their development.

Men's chambers preserve the language, customs, and traditions even nowadays as they consider it as a crucial value for the society.

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