

John Newall Private Collection of Albanian and Other Costume

Pinpointing the exact onset of a particular interest is mostly difficult and that is so with my involvement in Albania. When I was about 16, just after World War II, we were staying with my father's cousin, Robert Stirling Newall, in Wiltshire. He was a part-time archaeologist, author of the then current official guide to Stonehenge. I was reading in his sitting room when he suddenly dumped on my lap a pick of peculiar clothing, commenting "This is for you, John. Your great-grandfather brought it from Greece."

That was strictly true. My great-grandfather, an earlier Robert Stirling Newall who died in 1889, was an expert in submarine telegraph cables, which he claimed to have invented, and when supervising a cable linking Malta to Corfu (both British at the time, 1857), he stayed at some length on the Ionian island. I remember the family had retained a few of his letters bearing Queen Victoria Ionian Islands stamps.

The costumes landed upon me were not Greek but Albanian, one of them the size for a pre-teenage boy, and there is a picture of the younger Robert Newall dressed in it when about ten. Another photo showed his father, Arthur Newall, my father's uncle, in one of the adult costumes. Some of the costumes survive, although the 19th-century Albanian community in Corfu is gone. In fact, the costumes were more likely acquired in southern Albania, since visitors to Corfu usually took the chance to cross to the nearby Albanian mainland. Material for the most costly outfits was imported from England via Corfu.

My own first encounter with Albania was a bottle of *raki* (*grappa*) bought in Prague in 1953, next sharing an interpreter with the Mayor of Tirana at Varna (then called Stalin) in 1955. The earlier Robert Newall had spent some time at Varna a century earlier when the Anglo-French headquarters was there during the Crimean War. He laid the submarine telegraph cable from Varna to Crimea for military use.

That same year I saw my first Albanians, at Pejë and Prizren in Kosovo. Part of Albania during the WWII partition of Yugoslavia, under Tito and for a few years after his death, it retained varying degrees of autonomy. Visually it provided an incredible display of Albanian-ness, with an array of exotic costumes such as I had never seen. At that point I decided it would be interesting to add to my great-grandfather's acquisitions from the other corner of the Albanian world. Next year it was Kosovo again, and Ulqin (Uleinj), an Albanian town in Montenegro where the countywomen are dressed similarly to those across the border near Shkodër, Albania's capital in pre-1912 Ottoman times.

In 1957 I got an Albanian visa, an event so unique that it aroused amazement in the Foreign Office (their report is in the public domain) and got some press coverage. If Kosovo was a dream world for anyone appreciating daily-worn finery from a different age, northern Albania was beyond dreams. I have never seen the like of Shkodër on a market day, when people from the countryside came to town. Artefacts of any size were, however, difficult to take home in contrast to Kosovo, with Yugoslav customs free-and-easy about exports. The Tirana authorities were more possessive, but I managed a visit by car in 1959, staying first in Kukës over the border from Prizren (Kosovo). Motorised visitors, indeed all visitors, were unknown, and my car was guarded overnight by a uniformed man with a loaded Kalashnikov. The district was poor, with costumes unimpressive as compared with adjacent Kosovo, but driving down

to Shkodër they got better and better along the way. Arriving at Kukës, in that forlorn corner of the country, a little reception had been prepared, with an address by a charming English-speaking school master beginning “You have come to our country as your great Lord Byron came 150 years ago...” I felt outclassed.

Kukës was a glum, slightly threatening place, where the array of traditional dress, was palid compared with Kosovo a few miles away. Bajram Curri, another border town to the north, was inaccessible to outsiders in the communist period, but a 1990s traveller’s account caps my story of the closely guarded car. With the key to his hotel room he was given a loaded handgun. Unfavoured as the mountain clans were under communism, the finery that embellished their way of life long survived. In 1953 the Russians made a film in the country to help start an Albanian film industry. A drama about Skanderbeg, Albania's 15th-century national hero, for extras in crowd scenes they filmed mountaineers dressed traditionally, assuming it tallied with what was worn five hundred years before. Perhaps not, but the pictures are wonderful, and such people were to be seen visiting Shkodër and other lowland places. As to Kukës, in 1976 it disappeared under the Fierza Reservoir.

With a car, the problem of getting costume out proved surprisingly easy. The customs at Lake Ohrid were quite friendly, perhaps pleased to have company since few people went in or out. That was the last year that small private shops still existed in Tirana's bazaar area, just before it was bulldozed, and from them one could acquire not just good examples of costume but nice pieces of traditional jewellery. Returning after a gap in 1982, people were dressed like the rest of us, and the same was true even in Kosovo on a visit eleven years ago.