

## Subculture named *Muhaxhire* that live between Shijak and Durrës in Albania

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### Abstract

This study explores in sociological approach the *Muhaxhire* subculture living in the villages between Shijak and Durrës. These are Bosniaks who have emigrated from Bosnia to Albania almost a century and a half ago. The research focus is to investigate their subcultural features, analyze the factors that have influenced the preservation of these features and the relationship of the *Muhaxhire* subculture with the wider Albanian culture.

The research methods used in this study are qualitative methods and secondary source analyses. The instruments used for the collection of qualitative data are: semi-structured interviews, participant sociological observation and conversation analysis. The study is based on semi-structured conducted interviews with members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, and interviews with Albanians who have multilateral connections and collaborations with members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. The aim of the semi-structured interviews is to collect detailed data and analyze in comparative approach the *Muhaxhire* subculture with the Albanian society dominant culture. In addition, conversation analyses were conducted, as well as participant sociology observation method and secondary sources are used to collect detailed data.

This study highlighted *Muhaxhire* subculture features that distinguish it in some aspects from the dominant Albanian culture. These features are reflected in cultural symbols, cultural values, material culture, social relations, etc. The results of this study show that *Muhaxhire* subculture has had the needed space in Albanian culture to preserve and develop its subcultural features and identity. In addition, Albanian cultural values of tolerance and hospitality have contributed in this process. The study revealed that culture and subcultures are in a process of constant change. The subculture member can participate in several subcultures at the same time and without conflicting with the dominant culture. The members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are also members of *Central Albania* subculture. The results of the study show that *Muhaxhire* subculture members are integrated into Albanian society, but they also have a link with their ancestors' culture. They speak Bosnian language in a dialect from the last quarter of the 19th century inherited from their ancestors, but they also speak Albanian. The study revealed that Albanian society culture has created the needed space for Bosniaks to preserve and develop their subcultural identity, but at the same time the *Muhaxhire* subculture has not resisted to integrate into Albanian culture. This integration process has happened naturally.

**Keywords:** culture, subculture, cultural values, community, national minority, prejudice, ethnocentrism, cultural diffusion, adaptation, cultural symbols, material culture.

### Introduction

Every society has its own culture and subcultures. Culture encompasses the language and cultural symbols, values, cultural and legal norms, knowledge, beliefs, art, customs, etc. Culture is learned in interaction with others in society, whereas subculture has some distinguishing features from the dominant culture in a given society. The main objective of this paper is to study the subculture of the population

called *Muhaxhirë*, who live in the Republic of Albania, in the geographic area between Shijak and Durres villages.

Well-known Albanian culture scholars, from Faik Konica, Eqrem Çabej to the contemporary sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi have argued that Albanian society is quite rich in subcultures. Following this argument, the sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi analyzes: "...in the traditional Albanian society, small communities of inhabitants of a tribe or village had considerable space to develop their subcultural traditions, provided that they did not violate the main cultural norms and interests of larger social groups, such as the inhabitants of *bajrak* etc." (2013: 35).

In this paper, the *Muhaxhire* subculture is studied in analytic relation with the Albanian culture although it had the right space to survive and develop in the Albanian cultural environment while preserving its subcultural features.

Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture have been living in Albania for almost a century and a half and they have preserved some unique cultural aspects from their country of origin, Bosnia.

In the villages between Shijak and Durrës, some amicable proverbs are spoken about members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. Such as, "give to the Bosniaks but do not take from them", meaning that *Muhaxhires* can get an Albanian bride, but it is not good to give a *Muhaxhire* bride to the Albanians. This proverb expresses the special status and care that women enjoy in family and social life in *Muhaxhire* subculture. Also, other proverbs, such as "take care of your joy" and "who beautifully sings, badly does not think", that express the joy in *Muhaxhires'* life, as well as many traditions and customs aroused the curiosity to learn more about this subculture.

Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture have coexisted peacefully with Albanians without conflicts. They go to the same schools, work in the same offices, play on the same sports teams, and many other events. *Muhaxhires* and Albanians live in harmony with each other. Also, they have contributed in many areas in the community where they live and in Albanian society. They have contributed since the beginning of their settlement in Shijak, bringing with them some agricultural plants that later began to be cultivated throughout the Shijak area. Bosniaks and Albanians from Shijak share together joys and sorrows. Bosniaks have learned from Albanians wedding traditions and have taught to them the Bosnian traditional dance and dishes. Exchanges between *Muhaxhires* and Albanians have also occurred in getting married with each other and building families together.

Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are fully integrated into Albanian society, but have preserved Bosnian language and some aspects of their culture. Bosniak traditions and language are most prevalent in the village of Boraka, where almost the entire population is *Muhaxhire*.

With the democratic changes in the Republic of Albania after 1990 there has been a certain "revival" of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. On 28 October 1995, the Bosniaks community established the Bosniaks of Albania Association called "Zambak" (Lily), which holds the Bosnia symbol of the lily flower. On 13 October 2017, Bosniaks are recognized by law as a national minority in the Republic of Albania.

The *Muhaxhire* subculture has been brought to special attention after 1990 with the democratic changes in the Republic of Albania. The Bosniaks themselves founded

their association on 28 October 1995. After that, several activities were held about Bosniaks living in Albanian society. On the social group called *Muhaxhire*, there are writings about their history, language, spiritual culture and reports about their rights as a national minority in the Republic of Albania. The *Muhaxhire* subculture has often attracted the attention of the media, who have published articles in daily newspapers about Bosniaks living in Albania. But, this sociological investigation aims to study another dimension of them. Their subcultural features.

This study presents the relationship of the *Muhaxhire* subculture with the Albanian wider culture and identifies the similarities and differences between them from a cultural approach.

Another research objective is to provide data that analyze the factors that have contributed in preserving the subcultural features of the *Muhaxhire* subculture in the Albanian society cultural environment with a focus on cultural values. The sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi analyzes cultural values as "...the main components of cultural systems. They play a special role in the communications of such systems. Values are, so to speak, "invisible tissues with ideal fibers", which generally have high stability. The degree of proximity of the cultural values of different systems determines to a large extent the progress of people's adaptation when they temporarily or permanently move from the "environment" of one cultural system to another" (Dervishi, D., 2012: 24-25). In this study, the cultural values of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are extensively investigated in order to see their proximity to the Albanian cultural values. This research, among other things, sheds light on the cultural values of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, in comparative approach with the values of the dominant Albanian culture.

## Methods

This study, based on interviews, conversation analysis, literature review and documents, aims to identify the traditions of *Muhaxhire* subculture members.

The instruments used for the collection of qualitative data are: semi-structured interviews, participant sociological observation and conversation analysis. The study is based on 33 semi-structured conducted interviews, from which 27 interviews (18 men and 9 women) with members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, and 6 interviews (5 men and 1 woman) with Albanians who have multilateral connections and collaborations with members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. The aim of the 33 semi-structured interviews is to collect detailed data and analyze in comparative approach the *Muhaxhire* subculture with the Albanian society dominant culture. In addition, some 40 conversation analyses were conducted, as well as participant sociology observation method and secondary sources are used to collect detailed data.

Empirical studies, books and articles of historical and social perspective about subcultures have helped in the early stages of the study. The reliance on these materials has helped to clarify the research matters and to choose the most appropriate method for this study.

Like any other sociological research, this study began with the search for available data in the field of subculture and culture in sociological studies. The literature

used in the study was divided into four categories: (i) sociological literature about subcultures; (ii) historical writings, biographies, studies on the Bosniak community and reports; (iii) periodicals in newspapers, documentaries and television shows; (iv) publications and documents of the Association Bosniaks of Albania "Zambak".

This study included interviews with Bosniaks living in the villages of Borake and Koxhase, as well as interviews with Albanians living in Shijak who are associated with to Bosniaks. The study of the *Muhaxhire* subculture is an in-depth study with qualitative data, therefore the selected samples are first intentional, then with quota and snowball sampling in order to obtain detailed data from conversations and interviews. Throughout the analysis direct citations from participants collected during the interviews and conversations are quoted, in order to present the most detailed and original data. The data were also collected through participant sociological observation. Visits to funeral and wedding ceremonies, and other events of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture have helped to supplement the data extracted from interviews and conversation analysis.

### Main findings

The research data show some distinguishing features of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture revealed in the Albanian society environment.

In the history of the Albanian people there are no known conflicts caused by ethnic and religious motives. The data obtained in this study show that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Albanians have coexisted peacefully with each other from the beginning of the settlement of Bosniaks in the villages between Shijak and Durrës. One of the main factors that has determined in this coexistence is the value of tolerance. Albanian society is known for the cultural value of tolerance, especially for religious coexistence. Tolerance is a cultural value among members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture as well, and in addition to the religious side, it extends in various forms in several areas of life.

The study data revealed that in *Muhaxhire* subculture family, gender equality between girls and boys is somehow more achieved compared to Albanians families. This is manifested in equal treatment in inheritance, division of property, in the division of household chores, participation in social and cultural life of the community, as well as in the education of girls, more than Albanian girls and women.

The cultural values of tolerance in the *Muhaxhire* subculture distinguish from that of the Albanians, in the marriages among partners with different religions. These types of marriages are not totally excluded, but they prefer to marry partners of Muslim religious affiliation, especially when it's about marriages of Bosniak girls. For the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture it is not a problem to have their boys marry brides from non-Muslim religion, but do not prefer to have their daughters marry partners who do not belong to the Muslim religion. Although marriages with non-Muslim partners are not categorically excluded, they are not preferred by members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture living between Shijak and Durres.

Marriage by love, by their own choice, is a longstanding phenomenon of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, distinguishing them from Albanian traditional

society, in which marriages were performed by a mediator. In the marriages of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture the partners get to know each other and give their consent to the marriage without the intervention of parents, or other family members. On the other hand, the cases of marriage of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture with a mediator are not excluded, but they are fewer compared to the marriages of Albanians. The phenomenon of mediated marriages has been fading over the last three decades, but remains more present among Albanians than of members of *Muhaxhire* subculture.

Another distinguishing feature that data show is that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture do not marry according to the hierarchy of age and gender, unlike traditional Albanian society in which girls and older boys are married first, then the younger ones. Marriages according to age hierarchy are still found today in some Albanian families.

Some of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture included in this study, generally highly educated and elderly, testify that the first marriage between a Bosniak and an Albanian took place sometime in 1938, and that after World War II the marriages between Bosniaks and Albanians became more widespread. The data showed that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture continue to prioritize marriages with members within their subculture. Another important element that emerged from the study is that young men and women of the *Muhaxhire* subculture have no prejudices about marriages with Albanians living in the Republic of Albania. Marriages between Albanians and members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are common in contemporary Albanian society and do not encounter problematic socio-cultural barriers. The data revealed that marriages between members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Albanians are an important indicator of their integration into Albanian society.

The study data show that the main work performed by members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture when they first emigrated in Albania and later was in agriculture. They have brought some agricultural crops when they emigrated to Shijak and Durrës and have shared the ways of cultivating them with the Albanians. Many members included in this study express concern that agricultural work has declined over the past three decades and is no longer as important in their household economy as it was before 1990.

Regarding the character of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, the study showed that they are not reserved people to the same extent as the Albanians. In conversations and interviews with members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, it was noted that they openly and unreservedly expressed their views, religious affiliation, and opinions about each other and Albanians living in Shijak. This distinguishing from Albanians, as scholars of Albanian culture have argued that Albanians are generally reserved people.

Despite the peaceful coexistence, the data reveal that there are some mutual prejudices between them. The *Muhaxhires* find themselves labeled as rather naive by the Albanians living in Shijak, while they prejudice Albanians as non-progressive people. The *Muhaxhire* perceive being open, naive and sincere, equivalent of being a righteous person, unlike the prejudices of the Albanians towards them. Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture argue this perception by proudly stating that almost no or

very few young members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture were involved in the negative phenomenon of organized crime in Shijak, which emerged as a phenomenon after 1990 with democratic developments in the Republic of Albania.

Youth of the *Muhaxhire* subculture prefer not to be called *Muhaxhire*, but Bosniaks or *Bosanci*. Also, well-educated members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture prefer to be called Bosniak rather than *Muhaxhires*. The concept *Muhaxhire* for them is prejudicial, and they do not prefer it. However, these prejudices are overcome and are insignificant without compromising the peaceful coexistence between *Shijaks* and members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. Another element identified by the study is that these prejudices did not hinder the process of cultural diffusion between them and helped them be more aware of each other's subcultural features.

This study showed that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture share solidarity with each other. The data revealed that this cultural value has changed significantly over the years and that some members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture remember with nostalgia the period when they all worked together and helped each other. Another element highlighted is that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture in Shijak, although a small community, are organized and react collectively to issues that affect their interests.

Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, as well as Albanians and Balkan people in general, have the value of hospitality as part of their culture. They found hospitality among the Albanians in Shijak and Durres where they settled with housing and work. And also brought the value of hospitality with them from their country. The value of hospitality is found in the *Muhaxhires*, but not expressed in the rule and canonical norms as in traditional Albanian culture. The value of hospitality has influenced the peaceful coexistence between Bosniaks and Albanians. Albanian society has been hospitable to Bosniaks, and Bosniaks have not created conflicts and problems in the Albanian social environment.

Another conclusion from the data is that cultural values such as *Besa*, and the phenomena of blood feuds are not vital to the functioning of the social life of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. Distinguishing from Albanian traditional dominant culture.

The data collected show, that education is important for members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. Some of the members interviewed for this study attended university during the years of the totalitarian socialist system in Albania and one of the advantages for the *Muhaxhire* subculture members was the knowledge of the Bosnian language. They acknowledge that this has often helped them attend important university field studies during communism in Albania and also holding important job positions where knowledge of the Bosnian language was needed.

The data of the study show that *Muhaxhire* subculture rituals and customs of birth, marriage and death are similar or even the same as those of the dominant Albanian culture.

Some of the birth rituals and customs identified in this study are: baby birth news; inheritance of names; special care for 40 days, otherwise known as the maternity period, for the mother and the newborn child; special ceremonies to celebrate the birth of the child and the health of the mother are carried out through birth lunches.

Also, cutting a child's hair when is one-year-old, as well as raising a child in the cradle are similar customs between members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Albanians. However, it turned out that these customs and rituals have faded over the last three decades.

Other elements that are similar between members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Albanians from Shijak in wedding ceremonies, such as the arrival of the bride in her new family is accompanied by a series of rituals and superstitions. The bride's dowry is also a custom of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. The study found that the weddings of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture begin with the songs of Central Albania and end with the Bosnian dance. The Bosnian four-way dance is also danced at every Albanian wedding in the Shijak area.

The study identified several death rituals. The death rituals performed by members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Shijak Albanians are similar in many ways. The study revealed that this is because *Shijaks* and *Muhaxhires* are generally with Muslim religious affiliation. Rites similar to Albanians are: escort of the deceased wrapped in a white shroud; the extension of the days of consolation after death in Albanian culture and the *Muhaxhire* subculture are three, five / seven and forty days. These rites differ in some special features such as mourning because members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture consider mourning as a custom that is contrary to *Islam*. However, due to the integration in the Albanian society and family's relations with Albanians, they do not rule out the mourning of the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture. Mourning is an Albanian tradition, which has not been influenced by the Muslim religion.

This study also explored the impact of religion on the lives of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture part of Muslim religious affiliation. They have developed the same religious affiliation as their Muslim family. Religion plays an important role in their subcultural features. Religion plays an important role in their subcultural features. Rituals in funeral ceremonies are performed according to the verses in the *Qur'an* holy book. The data extracted from the participants in this study, Bosniaks and Albanians, show. Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture living in Borake and Koxhase are believers who practice religious rituals more frequently than the Albanians living around them.

The study revealed that family relationships among members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are primary to other social relationships. In their subculture, the grandmother has a special status in the family. Grandmother and grandfather live in the same family with grandchildren. Although the structure of the family has changed in contemporary societies, in Albanian society and in the *Muhaxhire* subculture, the phenomenon of coexistence of several generations in a family is present.

Women in traditional Albanian society, as in most societies in the world, have had subordinate status in family and society. The study identified that women members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture take care of household chores, caring for their children, spouses and other family members. Men, members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, take care that their wives do not get tired beyond the household. From the data obtained during the study, it was observed that *Muhaxhire* women have as primary their family and secondary the career, despite the fact that on the other hand the study data highlight the liberal and emancipatory nature of the *Muhaxhires*. But in this area

their liberal and emancipatory nature has not been revealed as much as necessary. The study revealed that good neighborly relations are known between members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture and Albanians living in surrounding areas in Shijak and Durres and no conflict are known between them. The *Muhaxhire* subculture, which resides in rural area have had all the necessary space to preserve their values, traditions and language.

In this study, the liking of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture for the holidays was also explored. The data identified that Eid is considered to be the most important and enjoyable holiday for them. Eid, a Muslim religious holiday, is celebrated throughout the area around villages inhabited by members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture.

Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture have preserved the traditions of their ancestors in the way of cooking. One of their favorite dishes is the *potato pie with with coral shape*, which is known as a special assortment of the Bosniaks of Shijak, who have also taught it to Albanians living close to them. Almost all the interviews with the members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture mention the potato pie as their favorite food and which is considered a bridge connecting with the tradition of their ancestors. Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture among sweets have sweets such as *qahija* and *baklava*.

Love in traditional Albanian society was experienced as something impossible. Eqrem Çabej explains that keeping the feeling of love secret in the song comes as a result of patriarchal customs. Among members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture love is sung through *sevdalinkas*. *Sevdalinkas* sing to love as something beautiful and chaste, without tragedy. The data of the study showed that in contrast to the songs sung in Central Albania, which present love as something impossible, members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture present love as something beautiful and joyful.

The data reveal that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture identify themselves as Bosniaks and related to Bosnia even though they are fully integrated into Albanian society and many of them are married with Albanians. Members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture identify themselves as Bosniaks and connected to Bosnia, even though they are fully integrated into Albanian society. Although they are a largely integrated cultural group with citizens' rights, like all Albanian citizens, they feel Bosniak.

The Bosnian language spoken within *Muhaxhire* subculture, especially in their families, preserves an old and unchanged dialect over the years from the moment of settlement in Shijak and Durrës. The use of the Bosnian language by members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture is mainly in spoken form, and less so in written form. During the interviews and conversations, they express the concern that youth and children no longer speak as much as before the Bosnian language. They rather speak Albanian. The members of *Muhaxhire* subculture fear that the Bosnian language will be forgotten one day. In Boraka, there have been efforts to teach the language to the younger generations. Occasionally teachers from Bosnia have come to live and work in Boraka to teach the younger generation the Bosnian language.

The study identified that the surnames of members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are important for their subcultural identity. Bosniaks surnames are part *Muhaxhire* members' subculture identity but have changed over time by adapting them in Albanian language in removing the suffix "iq"



## Conclusions

This study revealed that members of the *Muhaxhire* subculture cannot be positioned in subcultural categories of the *Muhaxhire* subculture alone. They are also members of several subcultures. This finding of the study is in line with the subcultural model argued by sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi with considerable contribution to the sociology of culture, that: "... it is easy, but generally incorrect, to position people only in a subculture subcategory, because almost everyone can be a member of several subcultures at the same time (2014:28). The *Muhaxhire* subculture has some differences with the members of the *Central Albania* subculture, but they also have many similarities making them members of this subculture and members of the dominant Albanian culture. The cultural differences of the *Muhaxhire* subculture are not so significant as to conflict with the rest of society, with the Albanians. Albanian society has welcomed the Bosniaks, and Bosniaks have not created conflicts and problems in the Albanian social environment. It is the approximations in cultural values, as well as tolerance as a cultural value of both parties that have enabled their peaceful coexistence.

This study revealed that the culture of Albanian society has created the necessary space for Bosniaks living in Albania for nearly a century and a half to preserve and develop their subcultural identity. At the same time, the *Muhaxhire* subculture has not been resistant to integration into Albanian culture, integrating naturally into it. The data collected for this study revealed that some subcultures of the *Muhaxhire* subculture, as well as the subculture of Central Albania and features of the predominant Albanian culture have faded especially during the last three decades under the pressure of globalist tendencies. In this context, this study can serve as a guide to document unexplored subcultures in the cultural space of the Republic of Albania before they fade further.

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