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Research Article

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From ethnographic narratives to cultural Tourism: Integrating intangible heritage into sustainable development in Northern Albania

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Abstract

This study examines the conventional clothing/costumes and decorative accessories from Shkodra and the Northern Highlands, as described by William Le Queux in "An Observer in the Near East" (1907), focusing on their cultural symbolism and potential role in the development of cultural tourism. What is observed reveals a dual dimension of clothing: everyday dressing characterized by elaborately embroidered garments, veils, and urban elements that displayed social status, modesty, and craftsmanship; and festive and ritual clothing, in which costumes and ornaments functioned as public displays of wealth, marital status, and collective identity. Women's clothing featured embroidered fabrics in red and black, complemented by white veils, colorful silk scarves, and heavy belts adorned with silver, iron, or decorative stones.
At the same time, men combined local and Ottoman elements such as the silk-ribbon fez, the silk shawl, and weapons, which were used symbolically, in ritual contexts, including during religious ceremonies.
The analysis reveals that colors and ornaments carried specific cultural meanings: red symbolized solemnity and strength, while white represented purity and devotion, and metals (gold, silver, and iron) embodied wealth and social prestige. These cultural codes transformed clothing into a visual language that conveyed identity, faith, and community belonging. In festive contexts, especially during the Festival of Our Lady of Shkodra, clothing and ornaments served as performative instruments combining material and intangible heritage.
This rich heritage unlocks exciting possibilities for sustainable cultural tourism. By reviving traditional festivals, designing special tours that celebrate traditional costumes and ceremonies, empowering local artisans, and incorporating intangible traditions (such as hospitality and meaningful ornamental symbols) into authentic visitor experiences, Shkodra can showcase its unique cultural character and attract discerning international travelers. The findings reveal that historical clothing and decorative arts represent more than symbols of belonging and social structure, and they are powerful instruments for safeguarding, sharing, and celebrating Albania's cultural legacy

Keywords: Shkodra, traditional clothing, jewelry, cultural heritage, cultural tourism.

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