



Research Article

An analysis of the Kosovar Henna Night in terms of traditional rituals and contemporary transformations

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Abstract

The henna night (kanagjeq) marks one of the most significant moments in the life cycle within Albanian tradition, carrying deep symbolic complexity. In traditional practice, the rituals taking place in the girl's family—such as the henna ceremony, preparation of the dowry, and ritual singing—include several days of preparations for her departure to the groom's household. Beyond transmitting inherited values across generations, these rites reflect social dynamics and cultural changes over the centuries. This study analyzes the function and symbolism of kanagjeq in its traditional context and contrasts it with contemporary performance styles that have evolved from traditional forms. By comparing classical forms and modern variants, the article highlights how the ritual preserves cultural identity while adapting to the influences of globalization, urbanization, and gender shifts. Ultimately, it is shown that contemporary transformations maintain the symbolic core of kanagjeq while reflecting the need to reconstruct cultural identity in a changing world.

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Introduction

Kosovo, despite being a newly established country, continues to develop thanks to its strategic location, deep historical background, and rich cultural foundations. In this context, analyzing the cultural codes of Kosovo and understanding the dynamics between cultural continuity and transformation is of great importance. It is especially crucial to trace how deeply rooted traditional rituals have evolved in the face of modern societal changes. One of the most prominent rituals in Kosovar culture is kanagjeqi (the henna night), a deeply emotional and socially symbolic ceremony that marks a young woman's transition into marriage. Typically held at the bride's home, this ritual serves not only as a festive celebration but also as a symbolic reflection of moral values, social structures, and gender roles. Over time, kanagjeqi has undergone several transformations influenced by globalization, urbanization, and shifts in the roles of women (Gega Musa, 2016; Munishi, 2020). While more traditional forms of the ritual are still preserved in rural areas, urban settings often present it in more modern, aesthetic, and performative styles (Reineck, 1991). This study aims to examine the kanagjeqi ritual in Kosovo from both traditional and contemporary perspectives, revealing how this cultural structure has transformed while certain elements have been preserved. In this regard, kanagjeqi is interpreted as a living tradition that connects the past with the present (UNESCO, 2003; Xhemaj, 2003).

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Kanagjeq and Its Surrounding Rituals

Kanagjeq represents a traditional ceremony with ritualistic character, marking the girl's transition into a new stage of life—marriage. In the Kosovar context, as in many other traditional cultures, this rite was held in the bride's family home and carried significant familial and social functions. Scholar Ukë Xhemaj emphasizes that in Albanian ethnological literature, the term “wedding in the bride's home” is often used to describe *kanagjeq*; however, he considers this a semantic distortion influenced by foreign cultures. According to the scholar:

“...In traditional Albanian customary culture, family and social customs are clearly distinguished. There are those related to joy, sorrow, and those with an intermediary nature—carrying elements of joy and a touch of melancholy—as is the case with the *kanagjeq*.² This mixed feeling of joy and sorrow is closely connected to the patriarchal perception of morality in traditional Albanian society. According to researcher Leontina Gega Musa, a cheerful atmosphere did not prevail in the bride's family, as her departure was also perceived as a loss. As she states: “...under the influence of the concept of patriarchal morality, an atmosphere of joy did not dominate in the family of the girl who was getting married; therefore, the solemnity of the wedding was limited.”³ Traditional terms such as “nata e kanës” (the night of the henna), “nata e bojës” (the night of the dye), or more commonly “kanagjeqi” carry connotations that are clearly distinct from those of the wedding itself.⁴ Due to the distinct connotation between these two rituals, researcher Krenar Doli also makes a clear distinction between these two ritual events, emphasizing the two main components of the *kanagjeq*: the feeling of joy for the marriage and the sorrow over the girl's separation from her family. According to him:

“The balance between these components has been weighed within the tradition of the Albanian family, leading to the naming of the *kanagjeq* rite—understood as a kind of ceremony that differs from the wedding itself.”⁵

Kanagjeq was usually organized several days before the wedding, and the starting day varied by region—typically Monday, Thursday, or Saturday—and continued until the day the bride left her parents' home. According to data from researcher Xhemaj, during this period the girl would go through several preparatory phases, involving rituals and ceremonial acts with symbolic functions marking her transition into married life.⁶ Meanwhile, researcher Janet Susan Reineck describes this rite of Albanian tradition as an intense period of transformation for the bride, during which, on the night of the *kanagjeq*, surrounded by friends and relatives, the girl would cry and embrace her family members—expressing both her departure and her transition into a new life. Reineck also mentions the dressing ritual (*veshatorja*), highlighting that “...a close woman, known as the *telake*...”⁷ ...or *veshatore*, accompanied the bride throughout the entire *kanagjeq*, took care of her clothing and preparations, and was responsible for placing the henna on her hands.⁸ They were responsible for displaying the dowry, selecting the clothes the girl would wear, and taking care of the gifts or money (*bakshish*) brought for the bride.⁹ On the following day, the bride was dressed by the *veshatorja*, and she would cry or lament continuously. It is known that on this day, songs were usually sung by the women for the bride, but she herself would not sing or lament on her own *kanagjeq* night. The atmosphere of this night was calm and often melancholic.¹⁰ A rich and detailed description is provided by researcher Vlorë Fetaj Berisha, who describes the chronology of the *kanagjeq* and the way in which the bride was informed of her departure.

...just as a wedding has its own chronology, so does the *kanagjeq*. The visit (*vadja*) was planned five weeks in advance, but the bride was not informed of the date. On the night before the *kanagjeq*, one of the daughters or paternal aunts (*ballë*) would take a piece of wool, soak it in water, and gently touch the bride's head with it while saying: “May your *kanagjeq* be blessed.” From that moment, the bride knew she would soon be leaving as a bride. The next day, the girl who was to become a bride was taken around to visit the neighbors, where she would greet and say

2 Xhemaj, U. (2005). *Shtresime kulturore* (Cultural Layers). Albanological Institute of Prishtina, Prishtina, p. 201.

3 Gega Musa, L. (2016). *From Rites of Passage to Celebrations (Prej rriteve të kalimit në kremtime)*. Gjurmime Albanologjike, Folklore and Ethnology, (46), 62. Prishtina: Institute of Albanology.

4 Rukiqi, M. (2009). Wedding Songs I (*Këngë Dasme I*). Prishtina: Institute of Albanology. p. 13.

5 Doli, K. (2015). The Wedding in the City of Gjakova (*Dasma në qytetin e Gjakovës*). Prishtina: Institute of Albanology. p. 107.

6 Xhemaj, U. (2003). Albanian Ethnoculture in Podgur (*Etnokultura shqiptare në Podgur*): Ethnological Monograph. Prishtina: Institute of Albanology. p. 181.

7 A name for the female wedding instructor that has been used in several regions, such as in the Opjë area.

8 Susan Reineck, J. *The Past as Refuge: Gender, Migration, and Ideology Among the Kosova Albanian*, University of California, Berkeley, 1991, p. 93.

9 Susan Reineck, J. *The Past as Refuge: Gender, Migration, and Ideology Among the Kosova Albanian*, University of California, Berkeley, 1991, p. 93.

10 Kanagjeqi Arbanës (Ngjitja e Kanës) emocionale, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRPkL54eJW8>, (qasur me 10.07.2024)

farewell to them. On the night of the *kanagjeq*, after the guests had arrived and dinner was served, the bride was dressed, a scarf was placed on her head, and the singing would begin. That night, as the henna was applied, various *kanagjeq* songs were sung.¹¹ One of the most well-known songs associated with this ritual is:

*The henna rises, drop by drop,
Tonight you are the flag among girls.
The henna rises with drops of red,
Tomorrow you are the flag among brides.*¹²



Photo1. Wedding celebration of d.k., Nepole village, Kosovo (photo from the family archive, 09.08.2021)

Kanagjeq songs constitute an essential component of the ritual, carrying multiple symbolic and emotional functions. These are mostly sentimental songs, marked by melancholic tones, in which the girl is touchingly reminded of her family members and the life she is leaving behind. In the historical and social context—when maintaining contact with one's family after marriage became more difficult due to distance, economic conditions, or patriarchal norms—these songs served as a means of expressing emotional separation.

Researcher Vlorë Fetaj Berisha emphasizes that in the past, married women rarely had the opportunity to return to their families, except on special occasions such as funerals, weddings, or rare visits. This explains the presence of weeping in this symbolically charged night.¹³ Scholar Visar Munishi has also written about *kanagjeq* songs, approaching the ritual and its surrounding practices from two perspectives: tradition and modernity, placing them on two interpretive tracks—traditional and contemporary. According to him, “...the songs sung during the night of the henna were mostly performed by groups of girls close to the bride—either close or distant cousins, as well as girls from the same village or community. In some cases, girls known for their singing abilities were specifically invited in order to create the proper atmosphere according to the ritual's requirements. Additionally, there are documented cases where *defatore* (frame drum players) or ‘professional’ ritual singers were invited, who specialized in performances during the *kanagjeq*.”¹⁴

¹¹ Vlorë Fetaj Berisha, “Dasma tradicionale shqiptare, dikur dhe sot” në emisionin Voyage - RTK . <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itjVrJPWsvM>, Facebook: <http://smarturl.it/RTKfb>, WEB: <http://smarturl.it/RTKweb>, (qasur me 22.08.2022).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Vlorë Fetaj Berisha, “Dasma tradicionale shqiptare, dikur dhe sot” në emisionin Voyage - RTK . <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itjVrJPWsvM>, Facebook: <http://smarturl.it/RTKfb>, WEB: <http://smarturl.it/RTKweb>, (qasur me 22.08.2022).

¹⁴ Munishi, V. (2020). *From Pain to Joy: The Change of Repertoire in the Traditional Henna Ritual (Nga dhembja në gëzim: Ndryshimi i repertorit në ritualin e kanagjeçit tradicional)*. Gjurmime Albanologjike, Folklore and Ethnology, (50), 115. Prishtina: Institute of Albanology.



Photo 2. singing of the bride d.k. with daf in her home-organized traditional wedding celebration, Nepole village, Kosovo. (photo from the family archive, august 2021)

Munishi also points out that, contrary to the general perception that *kanagjeq* is solely a sentimental or melancholic rite, field data show that this ritual also includes moments of joy and humor. He emphasizes:

“Despite the general belief that the traditional *kanagjeq* as a ritual consists only of emotional or sorrowful moments, empirical data prove otherwise. In this generally emotional ritual, there are also moments when joyful songs are sung.”¹⁵

These joyful songs often contained lyrics with humorous elements, serving to ease the emotional burden and entertain those present.¹⁶ The subjects of these satirical lyrics were often the bride’s future husband, mother-in-law, or other members of the new family, placing them at the center of attention through gentle irony. This humorous dimension in *kanagjeq* songs reinforces the performative and social character of the ritual, revealing culturally adapted ways of coping with emotionally charged situations.

***Kanagjeq* Songs and Their Ritual Function**

As discussed above, the night of the *kanagjeq*, especially the moment of applying the henna (also known as “boja” or the dye), was accompanied by numerous songs, which formed an essential component of this ritual.¹⁷ The songs were primarily emotional in nature, depicting the girl’s emotional separation from her family. Through their verses, they addressed the key figures in her life—her mother, father, brothers, sisters, and other relatives. Some of these verses, sung by her friends and cousins, describe the moment of parting with touching tones:

Cry, oh Havë, in your yellow scarf,
All your friends have gathered ‘round,
They’ve gathered and encircled you,
They want to send you to your husband.¹⁸

In addition to the songs, one of the most significant moments of the ritual also took place on this special night: the application of the henna. In traditional practice, this was the first time the girl had henna placed in her hair or on her hands, a task carried out under the care of the *veshatorja*.¹⁹ According to researcher Ajshe Berisha, in earlier periods this ritual act was not a simple one, but rather accompanied by special customs and rich symbolism. Berisha describes a scene in which the girl’s mother prepares a tray with the henna placed in a dish, set beside a pot of blooming flowers and lit

¹⁵ Munishi, V. The cited work, p. 113

¹⁶ Berisha, A. The cited work, p. 237.

¹⁷ Berisha, A. *The Wedding in the Bride’s Family in the Region of Kamenica* (“Dasma në familjen e vajzës në trevën e Kamenicës”), *Albanological Research – Folklore and Ethnology*, Vol. IX-1979, Institute of Albanology, Prishtina, p. 236.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The dresser instructs the bride on how to behave with her husband, his family, and how to dress.

candles (or an oil lamp). The girl, in silence and with emotion, extinguishes the candles.²⁰ Meanwhile, her friends would begin the ritual song:

Oh cry, dear Havë, on your sister's chest,
Do you know, sister, tonight is the night of the henna?
Oh cry, dear Havë, plead with your mother,
So that tonight they don't press the henna upon you.

These sentimental songs are found in all regions of Kosovo, where—according to ethnological and anthropological data—they are recognized as an inseparable element of the *kanagjeq* ritual. They served as a mechanism for expressing emotional separation, but also as a marker of the girl's transition into a new social role as a bride.

Another key moment was the display of the dowry (*çejzi*). This ritual usually took place on Saturday, also known as “women's day,” when the women of the family, along with friends and female relatives, gathered to view and celebrate the bride's trousseau. Each guest would bring symbolic gifts for the future bride, while the dowry items were arranged in two rooms: one containing the clothes and belongings the girl had prepared for herself, and the other containing gifts intended for the groom's family.²¹



Photo 3. exhibition of the bride's dowry, Gjakovë, Kosovo. (photo from the family archive, january 2010)

The dowry was arranged with great care, according to the age and familial closeness of the groom's family members.

22



Photo 4. The bride and the exhibition of the dowry made by her, Klinë, Kosovo (photo from the family archive, 2013)

During this day, the atmosphere in the bride's home was filled with songs and lamentations, marking the girl's final moments with the women of the household before departing to become a bride.

²⁰ Berisha, A. The cited work, p. 236.

²¹ Berisha, A. (1979). Dasma në familjen e vajzës në trevën e Kamenicës (The wedding in the bride's family in the Kamenica region). Gjurmime Albanologjike, Folklor dhe Etnologji, IX, 234. Prishtinë: Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës.

²² Ibid.

This ritual served not only to demonstrate her abilities and preparedness as a woman, but also to honor her family of origin and bid farewell to her social circle.

Some concluding elements of the ritual

Continuing the emotional atmosphere of the night of the *kanagjeq*, one of the most emotionally intense moments was the final songs sung for the girl, which were often accompanied by symbolic scenes of farewell with close family members.

Another well-known song sung by the girl's friends is:

*Crying, oh Havë, with the yellow scarf,
When the women from your uncle's house arrive, who will greet them first?
Who will greet them, who will invite them in?
If it's not Havë, they won't step inside.*²³

Songs like this not only reflect the pain of separation, but also highlight the appreciation of the girl's role within her family and social context. They reinforce the image of the bride as a cherished, respected, and central figure in Albanian culture. During the evening, a ritual dinner was also held in honor of the women present—friends, aunts from both sides of the family, and other female relatives. This moment carried symbolic significance, serving as a form of gratitude and farewell from the girl to her circle of women. In a way, the women acted as witnesses and supporters of the ritual, accompanying the bride with songs, advice, and gifts.

It is important to emphasize that the organization of the *kanagjeq* had many variations across different regions of Kosovo. Differences could be observed in the order of rituals, the lyrics of songs, the composition of the trousseau (*çejz*), or the way the community participated. These regional distinctions enrich our cultural heritage, both in its material and spiritual dimensions, and testify to the dynamism of Albanian tradition. Although rooted in patriarchal structures, this tradition has created space for collective, emotional, and cultural expression.

In conclusion, despite the lack of great festivity in the bride's home—often dictated by traditional moral norms—the *kanagjeq* remains one of the richest rituals in terms of structure, content, and symbolism. It continues to live on today in various forms adapted to modern contexts.

Contemporary Transformations of the Kanagjeq

In terms of how the *kanagjeq* is organized today, it is evident that this ritual—like many other life-cycle rituals—has undergone numerous changes under the influence of various social, economic, and cultural factors. These transformations are closely tied to developments in family structure, women's emancipation, and the globalization of cultural models. Some of the elements that have gradually faded or disappeared from the *kanagjeq* ritual have also been identified by researcher Bashkim Lajçi. In addition to changes in the Albanian wedding itself, he mentions the transformation of the girls' pre-wedding gathering. According to him:

“...the custom of dyeing the hair, placing henna on the bride—which used to take place one or two days before the bride was taken—along with the gathering of women and girls who participated in this ceremony, as well as other actions related to the separation from maidenhood, are no longer practiced or are practiced very rarely today.”²⁴

After the last war in Kosovo, especially in the first post-war years, there was a noticeable decline in the practice of wedding ceremonies, including the *kanagjeq*, which were usually organized in a more modest manner. However, with the improvement of socio-economic conditions, particularly in recent years, a moderate revival of some traditional elements of this ritual has been observed. Organizing the *kanagjeq* in restaurants has become quite common, although

²³ Berisha, A. The cited work, p. 237.

²⁴ Lajçi, B. (2020). Ndryshimet bashkëkohore në dasmën tradicionale shqiptare (Contemporary changes in the traditional Albanian wedding). *Albanologji* II, (10), 2010–2019. Prishtinë: Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, p. 14.

there are still instances where the ritual is held in the bride's home, in a more intimate setting, in the presence of female relatives, extended family, and her friends.



Photo 5. Henna night in the courtyard of the bride's home, Nepole village, Kosovo (photo from the family archive, August 2021)

Likewise, the bride's lament during the singing accompanied by the *def* (traditional frame drum), or with a singer performing traditional *kanagjeq* songs, has been symbolically revived.



Photo 6. Singing of the bride at the henna night (Web 5)

Scholar Leontina Gega Musa considers this return to be more of a symbolic act, represented primarily through its aesthetic and performative aspect:

“...this ritual has returned only as a symbolic act, because the bride in the current context arrives at the celebration of the henna night already styled by beauty salons, which are regularly frequented by girls and women (regardless of social status) as an essential part of feminine grooming.”²⁵

Thus, *kanagjeq* rituals continue to be practiced in various ways, often intertwining traditional elements with new cultural influences. In rural areas, there is a greater dedication to preserving the traditional form, including the use of henna and *kanagjeq* songs, while in urban areas, the experience of this ritual often takes the form of a modern celebration.

It cannot be denied that, in some families—especially in rural regions—the symbolism of the henna and some elements of tradition are still preserved, accompanied by *kanagjeq* songs performed by various singers from the Albanian entertainment scene.²⁶ This does not imply a loss of value; on the contrary, by preserving old symbols within new

²⁵ Gega Musa, L. (2016). *Prej riteve të kalimit në kremtime (From rites of passage to celebrations)*. *Gjurmime Albanologjike, Folklor dhe Etnologji*, (46), 65. Prishtinë: Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës.

²⁶ Doci, A., & Doci, A. (n.d.). *Nata e kënasë (The night of henna)*. Web3: <https://orainfo.net/aida-para-pak-kohe-eshte-bere-nene-por-asgje-nuk-po-e-ndalon-qe-te-jete-pjese-e-kanagjejeve/>

Web3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnDweke2Yig> (Accessed on January 15, 2025).

contexts, tradition gains longevity and adaptability. In many cases, instead of traditional songs, modern music is played, and the *kanagjeq* experience has been transformed into an event influenced by different cultural styles. A clear example of this influence is the increasingly frequent use of the term “Bride to Be,” reflecting the direct impact of Western culture on local rituals. Despite these changes, the importance of preserving elements of cultural heritage remains essential. Researchers and cultural institutions continue to promote traditional values through festivals, exhibitions, and scientific and cultural activities aimed at affirming and documenting the spiritual wealth of the people.

Conclusion

The *kanagjeq* ritual, as a fundamental part of the Albanian cultural heritage, has undergone a profound transformation influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. These changes are a natural consequence of societal developments and globalization, which have altered the way this ritual is experienced and organized. The analysis of its development shows that although some traditional elements have faded or disappeared, others have been preserved, revived, or incorporated into new forms of ritual expression. In rural areas, forms closer to the past are still preserved, whereas in urban areas, the ritual often takes on a more modern character, becoming an aesthetic or performative celebration. Nevertheless, the preservation of symbolic elements even within new forms represents an opportunity for the continuity of tradition and cultural identity. In this sense, it is essential to encourage practices that safeguard and revitalize cultural heritage, giving life to a new form that blends the old with the new. This approach not only brings renewed meaning to the *kanagjeq* ritual but also helps preserve the collective identity and cultural memory of the Albanian people.

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Dr. **Angjelina Hamza-Hasanaj** is an ethnologist and researcher of Kosovar cultural heritage, born on September 22, 1982, in Klina, Kosovo. She completed her primary and secondary education in her hometown, initially focusing on general medicine (2001). She pursued undergraduate studies in Ethnology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Prishtina (2004–2007), and completed her Master's degree in Sociology at the same faculty (2011–2013). She earned her PhD on July 14, 2022, at the “Ss. Cyril and Methodius University” in Skopje, within the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, with a dissertation that explored the role of women as heads of households in Kosovo from a historical and anthropological perspective. Her professional career began as a nurse in a private clinic in Klina, and later she transitioned into academia. Since 2009, she has been engaged with the Albanological Institute of Prishtina, initially as an intern in the Department of Ethnology, later as an independent researcher, and currently as a scientific associate (assistant professor). As of September 2023, she has served as the Head of the Department of Ethnology, and since October of the same year, she has been a member of the Governing Council of the Albanological Institute. Her research focuses on issues related to the structure and function of traditional Albanian families, interfaith marriages, life-cycle rituals, and cultural transformations in contemporary urban contexts. Dr. Hamza-Hasanaj has made a significant contribution to the study of intangible cultural heritage in Kosovo and beyond, using ethnological and anthropological approaches. She has participated in over 35 national and international scientific conferences, representing the Albanological Institute on various themes such as urban anthropology, traditional rituals, family structure changes, and the impact of the pandemic on ritual practices and traditions. She is the author of a youth novel, “*Çelin lulet e ëndërrimeve*” (“*The Blossoms of Dreams*”, 2001), and the scientific monograph “*Interfaith Marriages among Albanians in Kosovo*” (Albanological Institute, 2022). She is also co-author of the bibliographic work “*Folklore and Ethnology in the journal Gjurmime Albanologjike (1971–2023)*” (Prishtina, 2024). She has published over 30 scientific articles in specialized journals such as *Gjurmime Albanologjike*, *Albanologji*, *Studime Albanologjike*, *EtnoAlb*, *Scupi*, *Shenja*, and *Sharri*, where she has addressed topics such as family organization, traditional clothing, cultural symbols, traditional food, folk beliefs and rituals, and the impact of globalization on cultural identity. In addition to her research work, she is involved in reviewing scientific works by renowned authors such as Ali Muka, Izaim Myrtezani, Bashkim Lajçi, Anton K. Berisha, and Vjollca Krasniqi. Her writings have also been featured in the Kosovar dailies *Kosova Sot* and *Koha Ditore*.
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- Web 4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRPkL54eJW8>,
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