

ALBANIA – INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

Albania is officially known as the Republic of Albania. It is bordered by Greece, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The population is 3.6 million. There are also about 2 million Albanians in Kosovo, 500,000 in the Republic of Macedonia, and 100,000 in Montenegro. In early 1990 Albania ended 46 years of communist rule. Whilst the economy of the country is improving, poverty still exists, particularly in the north. The two major subcultures of Albania are the Gëgs (sometimes written as Ghegs) in the north and the Tosks in the south.

LANGUAGE

Albanian is the official language but Greek, Vlach, Romani and Slavic are also spoken.

RELIGION

Muslim 70%

Albanian/Greek Orthodox 20%,

Roman Catholic 10%

(These percentages are estimates. In 1967 all mosques and churches were closed and only in 1990 were Albanians allowed to practise religion openly)



RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

BAJRAMI I MADH – is the same as Eid-ul-Fitr in other Muslim countries and is celebrated the day after the end of Ramadan.

DITA E NËNË TEREZËS - Mother Theresa Day is an official holiday celebrated in honour of the Mother Theresa, an Albanian Roman Catholic nun.

EASTER, CHRISTMAS and NEW YEAR are also celebrated.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Albanians are animated in their expression and gesture with their hands, shrug their shoulders and roll their eyes. They might nod their heads or shake their index finger to respond to a 'no' question and shake their head for 'yes'.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Albanian men embrace and kiss each other's cheeks upon meeting, however, kissing between the sexes in public is considered immoral. Men might link arms when they walk along. Politeness demands that upon entering an Albanian home the guest is offered a drink, usually coffee, and a sweet. It is rude to refuse these refreshments.

MARRIAGE AND CHILD REARING PRACTICES: The father is the ultimate authority for all major decisions and children obey the father without question. Male sons are groomed to take over the role as family leader. Pregnant women are greeted with an expression *të lindtënjëdjale* (May a son be born) demonstrating the ingrained views of male superiority. At the birth of a son in the northern mountains rifles were fired. Women were only officially wed after they had given birth to a boy. In Berat a beam of a house was painted black if a girl was born, symbolising the family's disappointment. These are older customs yet they demonstrate the entrenchment of patriarchal views.

CLOTHING: The *fustanella*, is a kind of Albanian kilt worn by men that was adopted during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Men can sometimes be seen wearing the *fez*, the traditional Turkish cap. Embroidered blouses in the Turkish style are worn by women. Women's heads are covered by a *kerchief* so that the hair is not seen. These often have gold coins on the headband. Western dress is more common in the cities but the general dress is always modest.

STATUS OF WOMEN: Females traditionally owned nothing and had no rights. Although the status of women improved during communist rule, the old attitudes revived at the end of it. Many social service groups are actively trying to affect long entrenched views about women. Spousal abuse is common. Though changing, there is still minimal representation of women in government or public life at all. Since the collapse of communism trafficking of women and young girls for prostitution has been an issue of concern to international social organizations. Independent reports place Albania as a pivotal route for trafficking women and children to other countries.

FOLKLORE

Fairies, snakes and dragons are common symbols expressed through crafts. The women embroider clothing and household items and the men work in metal and copper. **CUISINE** Some traditional cuisine survived the lengthy communist rule. Orthodox Albanians eat *qumështor*, a custard dish made of flour, eggs, and milk, before the beginning of Lent. During the annual spring festival, the central Albanian women bake a sweet cake known as *ballakum Elbasani*. Members of the Islamic *Bektashi* sect mark the end of the 10 day fasting period with a special *ashura* (pudding) made of cracked wheat, sugar, dried fruit, crushed nuts, and cinnamon. Lamb is the preferred meat. *Lakror* (LAHK-roar) is a mixture of eggs, vegetables or meat, and butter wrapped in thin, multi layered pastry sheets. *Fërgesë* (FUHR-ges) is a popular dish made with minced meat, eggs, and ricotta cheese. Bread is a major staple of the Albanian diet.

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