"AN ANCIENT DANCE THAT IS STILL PERFORMED TODAY":

Folk Culture, Nationalism, and Socialist Art in Albania after the Fourth Plenum of 1973

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Abstract

This article analyzes artistic debates about folk culture and Socialist Realism that took place in state socialist Albania in the 1970s. It begins by exploring the impact that dictator Enver Hoxha's infamous Fourth Plenum speech had on the visual arts and culture more broadly, and then proceeds to investigate the increasing emphasis on national and folk identity that characterized art critical discourse in Albania after 1973. The article aims to overcome simplistic interpretations of this phenomenon that straightforwardly equate increasing devotion to

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national themes in the visual arts as part of a decline catalyzed by Albania's growing isolationism in the 70s decade. Instead, the article shows that the turn to folk themes and practices reflected the extension of certain logics of Albanian Socialist Realist discourse, and parallelled similar developments elsewhere in the world of the late Cold War, with nations in the decolonizing world and established socialist nations alike increasingly focusing on crafts, the applied arts, and the popular forms of making they reflected and developed. The article asks: can we read the prominence of national and folk narratives as part of a complex navigation of Albania's place in relation to the decolonizing world, as well as the major powers of the Cold War? Can the stronger turn towards folk culture be read as an effort to achieve a kind of totalizing aesthetic account of socialist society, to capitalize on the promise of Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution (begun in the late 1960s) while at the same time profoundly shifting cultural reference points away from Soviet art?

Keywords: *Socialist Realism, art history, folk art, nationalism, socialist culture, Albania, decolonization*

> "…[A]n important aspect of the continuing life of folklore in the current conditions of building socialism is the ever-increasing proximity of the people's art[2] with other cultural formations of

[2] In English usage, the use of the term "people's" as an adjective to describe art or culture associated with the traditions of rural or working-class populations may sound awkward, since the term "folk" (as in "folk crafts") might be more commonly used. However, this ignores the substantial conceptual work that the term *popullor* (of the people) performed in Albanian: there was both "*arti popullor*" (the art of the people, as in: art often in

socialist art, with amateur art and cultivated artistic practice. This proximity has come about because socialism made the working people the sole creative subject […]".—Alfred Uçi[3]

I. Introduction

In the pages of the colossal 1969 photobook *Shqipëria socialiste marshon* (*Socialist Albania Marches On*) a photograph of sculptors Kristaq Rama, Muntaz Dhrami, and Shaban Hadëri at work on a model of the Vlora *Independence Monument* (which would be inaugurated in November 1972) is juxtaposed with a photograph of a display of applied art and folk crafts, including ceramic figurines, textiles, and metal- and woodwork. (**Fig. 1**) The caption of the photo of the three sculptors reads "Through collective work, our sculptors often produce works of value to immortalize the major historical events of the Albanian people", while the caption to the latter photo explains "Articles of arts and crafts are another manifestation of the genius and creative

traditional media created by rural or working classes) and "*republika popullore*" (the "people's republic"), and the use of terms like "folk" (or even "popular") does not capture the resonances between the two. Thus, in this article, I follow Albert Doja and translate "*popullor/e*" as "people's", although I do still use the term "folk" to describe crafts, traditions, and practices, simply because of the term's prevalence in English-language scholarship on these phenomena. (Similarly, I refer to the Instituti i Kulturës Popullore as the "Institute of Folk Culture", although the implications of "the people's culture" should not be ignored.) See Enika Abazi and Albert Doja, "From the Communist Point of View: Cultural Hegemony and Folkloric Manipulation in Albanian Studies under Socialism", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies,* vol. 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 163–178, here 165.

[3] Alfred Uçi, "Vendi i artit popullor në kulturën artistike socialiste", in Uçi, *Probleme të estetikës*, Tiranë: Shtypshkronja e Re, 1976, pp. 5–33, here 15.

capabilities of the Albanian people".[4] Produced in the early years of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, *Shqipëria socialiste marshon* reflected enthusiasm about the changes in Albanian society ongoing at the time, but photobooks of this kind were also intended as a means of promoting Albanian progress outside the country (hence the book's multilingual captions, with editions printed in several languages). The apparently innocuous pairing of these two photographs—creating a clear parallel between the labor of sculptors working to shape the visualization of national history and the work of artisans producing objects using traditional materials and methods associated with the applied arts—also forecasted the direction that discourse about the arts would take in the 1970s, particularly the period after Enver Hoxha's speech at the Fourth Plenum of the Party's Central Committee in June of 1973.

That speech, entitled "To deepen the ideological struggle against foreign manifestations, and against liberal attitudes towards them",[5] represents a turning point in postwar Albanian art, initiating a shift away from the openness that had previously characterized socialist culture, beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the early years of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution. A certain 'common knowledge' approach to the late

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[4] *Shqipëria socialiste marshon*, Tiranë: Naim Frashëri, 1969, pp. 178–179. Translation in original. For an analysis of the genesis of the Vlora monument, see Raino Isto, "The Dictator Visits the Studio: The Vlora Independence Monument and the Politics of Albanian Monumental Sculpture, 1962–1972", *Third Text* vol. 32, no. 3, 2018, pp. 500–518.

[5] Enver Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike kundër shfaqjeve të huaja e qëndrimeve liberale ndaj tyre", in *Mbi letërsinë dhe artin*, Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1977, pp. 375–443. All translations from Albanian to English are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

1970s (and early 1980s) sees these years as representing an increasingly nationalist direction in the arts, with art and aesthetics turning ever more explicitly and frequently to folk culture and national myths as a subject matter, as opposed to the more internationalist bent of much visual art in Albania in the previous decade. This shift is often—implicitly or explicitly—read as part of a general decline of society and economic stagnation[6] in state socialist Albania that characterized the later years of the regime (which are also then remembered as the years that demonstrate the predetermined failure of the communist project in Albania).[7] The increasing nationalism and supposed isolationism[8] of the period roughly beginning in the mid- to late-1970s is often the lens through which the entire period of Albanian state socialism is read, and the picture of Albanian

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[6] Gjergj Erebara, "Elementi demografik në krizën ekonomike të viteve '80", *Përpjekja* vol. 20, nos. 32–33, Spring 2014, pp. 110–128, here 110.

[7] Many of these characterizations appear in publications that are now decades old (see Miranda Vickers' chapter "The Retreat into Isolation" in *The Albanians: A Modern History*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999, pp. 201–209, or James Pettifer, "Albania: The Democratic Deficit in the Post-Communist Period", in Tom Gallagher and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Experimenting With Democracy: Regime Change in the Balkans*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 237–248, for examples of this framing), and written by foreign scholars, but they nonetheless persist. As more astute recent scholarship on this period has pointed out, in its later years the Albanian socialist regime "was not a passive or apathetic gerontocratic state, deprived of responses, energy, or imagination", as Artan Hoxha puts it. See: Artan Hoxha, *Sugarland: The Transformation of the Countryside in Communist Albania*, New York: CEU Press, 2023, p. 207.

[8] On the problems of applying the term "isolationism" to Albania's socialist period, see Mentor Beqa, "A Critique of the Concept of Isolationism: The Case of Albania", *European Academic Research* vol. 4, no. 12, March 2017, pp. 10705–10715.

society produced through this lens is rarely nuanced. The fact that the latter half of the 70s is also the period in which a number of artists were imprisoned (Edison Gjergo and Ali Oseku in 1975, and Maks Velo in 1978, for example)[9] has only added to the generally grim assessment of this period in cultural histories.

This article aims to briefly—and certainly not exhaustively—investigate some of the debates and initiatives that took place after the Fourth Plenum, and to help provide an overview of what the increasing prevalence of debates about national identity and folk culture and traditions comprised and enacted in the 70s decade. The article's title is drawn from a short excursus by the ethnographer Ramazan Bogdani, published in *Drita* (*The Light*, the weekly publication of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists) in 1978, focused on a dance performed at the 1973 edition of the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival. Bogdani's description of the *vallja e fëllanxave* (the "dance of the partridges", or "dance of the grouse") performed at the festival traces the history of the dance, its transformation over time through several different versions. Bogdani highlights the way that contemporary performers carry—in their memories and bodies—the possibility for even the most obscure dances (such as this one) to "be regenerated" in contemporary culture.[10] This emphasis on long histories of embodied practice and the gradual change of traditions over time both complements and stands at odds with the debates on Socialist Realist art that so distinctly

[9] Fjoralba Satka Mata, "Albanian Alternative Artists vs. Official Art Under Communism", in Cristian Vasile, ed., *History of Communism in Europe*, vol. 2, Bucharest: Zeta, 2011, pp. 79–94, here 82–85.

[10] Ramazan Bogdani, "Një valle e lashtë që vazhdon të kërcehet", *Drita*, 5 March 1978.

characterized the previous decade and the first years of the 70s, with their emphasis on the new experiences of socialist society and the drive to find new "means of artistic expression".[11] This is certainly not to suggest that the framework of Socialist Realism—with its efforts to "depict reality in its revolutionary development" (as Andrei Zhdanov characterized its fundamental mission)[12]—disappeared from discussions in the art world of state socialist Albania. But the idea of socialist life and proletarian identity clearly became ever more entwined with notions of heritage (from both antiquity and the medieval period), ethno-national identity, and traditional cultural forms.

This issue of *Art Studies* looks broadly at the topic of 'revisionisms', in both the sense of 'revisionism' used by the Albanian state socialist regime to critique the turn against Marxist-Leninist principles by regimes like the Thaw-era Soviet leadership, and in the broader sense of efforts to rewrite and reinterpret history in the last century. Building upon more general overviews of art in the late 1970s,[13] my analysis in this article looks at debates about art, aesthetics, and culture in this decade, attempting to reconstruct the stakes of art after Enver Hoxha's condemnation of "foreign manifestations" (most notably including modernist influences). Put simply, this article asks: was

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[11] Raino Isto, "'This Exhibition Will Go Down in Our History of Painting': Art Exhibitions in Albania around 1972 and the Promise of Spring", *Art Studies* no. 21, 2022, pp. 89–135, here 100–101.

[12] Andrei Zhdanov, qtd. in "Contributions to the First All-Union Conference of Soviet Writers [Extracts]", in John Bowlt, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, New York: Viking Press, 1976, p. 293.

[13] See especially the survey of this period in Ermir Hoxha, *Historia e Artit Shqiptar 1858–2000*, Tiranë: Aldesign, 2019, pp. 207–251.

the increasing emphasis on national (and nationalist) themes merely the result of an increasingly insular cultural policy, a complete foreclosure on the efforts to posit a more dynamic and contemporary Socialist Realism that took place before the Fourth Plenum? Or, can we read the prominence of national and folk narratives as part of a complex navigation of Albania's place in relation to the decolonizing world, as well as the major powers of the Cold War? Can the stronger turn towards folk culture be read as an effort to achieve a kind of totalizing aesthetic account of socialist society, to capitalize on the promise of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution while at the same time profoundly shifting cultural reference points away from Soviet Socialist Realism?

Certainly, the notion that state socialist cultural politics sought (as a modernizing enterprise) to facilitate what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger termed "the invention of tradition"[14] is not new, and my aim here is not to focus primarily on the ways that the creation of new kinds of knowledge about folk culture was manipulated by the leaders of socialist Albania as part of the instrumentalization of ethnographic research or ideas.[15] Rather, I am interested in trying to understand how Albanian artists and arts administrators saw the shifting relationships between institutionalized Socialist Realism and the continued development of discourses about traditional forms of creative expression (such as dance, oral folklore, and craft production) and historical narratives that emphasized Albanian ethno-

[14] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
[15] Abazi and Doja, "From the Communist Point of View".

national identity. Inspired by the approaches of recent analyses of craft in the People's Republic of China,[16] studies of socialist art in the decolonizing world,[17] and work on the late socialist culture of the Central Asian Soviet Republics,[18] I argue that despite the turn towards recognizably national forms and stories, cultural production in Albania in this period can still be seen as part of an effort to credibly build a world defined by socialist commitments to anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist ideals, and to working-class solidarity. I also argue that this shift was part of a broader effort to understand artistic and aesthetic experience more holistically in the context of socialist society, moving away from a reliance on the history of academic painting (to which Socialist Realism ultimately belonged) and instead emphasizing

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[16] Christine I. Ho, "Crafting Friendship", *Art History* vol. 45, no. 5, November 2022, pp. 1016–1036.

[17] For some examples, see, on Vietnam: Chương-Đài Võ, "From the Academy to Revolution", in Magda Lipska and Piotr Słodkowski, eds., *Was Socialist Realism Global? Modernism, Soc-modernism, Socially Engaged Figuration*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023, pp. 161–173; on the Philippines: Patrick D. Flores, "Social Realism: The Turns of a Term in the Philippines", *Afterall* no. 34, October 2013, pp. 63–75; and on African literary cultures: Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. For a lengthier discussion of Albanian socialist-era culture, nonalignment, and decolonization, see Raino Isto, "A Different Narrative of Nonalignment? The Case of Socialist Albania in the Art History and Geography of East-Central Europe", in Caterina Preda and Magdalena Radomska, eds., *Plural and Multiple Geographies of Modern and Contemporary Art in East-Central Europe*, New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2024.

[18] Christianna Bonin, "The Art of the Sixtiers in Soviet Kazakhstan, or How to make a Portrait from a Skull", *Central Asia Survey* vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 34–56, and Naomi Caffee, "Between First, Second, and Third Worlds: Olzhas Suleimenov and Soviet Postcolonialism, 1961–1973", *Russian Literature* nos. 111–112, 2020, pp. 91–118.

the collective creative capacities of both urban and rural working classes.

II. The Fourth Plenum Speech and "The Traces of Tradition"

Before delving into some of the ways the arts began to weave new narratives of national identity in the 1970s, we must look at one of the main (in all likelihood, *the* main) event that shifted artistic discourse from the path it followed in the early 1970s. Enver Hoxha's speech at the Fourth Plenum is deserving of an entire analysis to itself—which emphatically cannot be accomplished here—but my goal is simply to highlight some of the primary aspects of the dictator's critique of the political and cultural situation in 1973. Hoxha's speech was, first of all, a call for militancy in the face of "American imperialism and Soviet revisionism", forces that he notes had become ever more ubiquitous, and ever more fervent in their calls for "peaceful coexistence", for the "lowering of tensions", for "talks" (as Hoxha put it)—creating a "fatalist" and "pacifist" atmosphere and pushing governments around the world towards capitulation with the great powers of the Cold War.[19] The greatest danger, Hoxha asserts, is the push for "liberalization", an "ideological and political opportunism" that seeks to abandon the class war and advance the idea that "capitalism and socialism are now converging towards a single society".[20]

While Hoxha is critical of many cultural phenomena in the speech, it is widely agreed that one of the most direct objects of

[19] Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike", p. 379.
[20] Ibid., pp. 381–382.

his criticism is the 11th Festival of Song (which took place in December 1972), and specifically the director of the Albanian Radio-Television, Todi Lubonja, along with the playwright Fadil Paçrami—both of whom were subsequently removed from the Party and imprisoned.[21] Even though Lubonja and Paçrami are the explicit anti-Party elements Hoxha discusses at greatest length, he elaborates on what he frames as urgently dangerous elements across the arts. Hoxha's speech is a deeply conflicted one. On the one hand, it struggles to advance a militant position by arguing for the necessity of recognizing social contradictions (between classes) and geopolitical contradictions (between socialist nations and capitalist and imperialist ones). On the other hand, it seeks to condemn works of art that have highlighted contradictions in Albanian socialist society, and especially in the Albanian Party of Labor. Hoxha's explicit targets of criticism are works of art, literature, poetry, or cinema that depict the Party as "strangled by bureaucratism", that reflect an image of society torn by "an unavoidable war between generations". He also criticizes works of art that have pursued "small, intimate themes"—and in doing so have "turned away from significant social problems"—as well as the "theme of human isolation".[22] "In the figurative arts," he explains, "under the banner of the struggle against scholasticism, academicism, naturalism, and so forth, works with foreign, modernist influences old and new—even including borrowings from Impressionism and Cubism—

[21] For an overview of the 11th Festival of Song, and the purging of Lubonja and Paçrami, see Nicholas Tochka, *Audible States: Socialist Politics and Popular Music in Albania*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 90–103.

[22] Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike", p. 385.

have often not only been justified, but even taken as models of creative valor and innovation."[23] Here, Hoxha is clearly referring to the debates that took place in *Drita* in the early 1970s,[24] about the 1971 National Exhibition and the *Pranvera* (*Spring*) exhibition of early 1972—and specifically the critical writings, like those by art critic Andon Kuqali, which explicitly valorized the works of artists like Edi Hila and Edison Gjergo, calling for Albanian Socialist Realism to absorb the historical experiences of Cubism and other modernist styles.[25]

In the speech, Hoxha reaffirms the necessity for art criticism—like the arts—to take its lead from "the principles of the method of Socialist Realism, which have emerged from the experience of revolutionary proletarian art across the globe".[26] It is clear that the institutional methods of Socialist Realism are still central (for Hoxha, at least) to the development of the arts in Albania. However, he also asserts that an explicit valorization of national culture is a necessity in the face of imperialist threats from without: "Bourgeois imperialism has always tried to denigrate or to eliminate the cultural traditions of marginal peoples, the national inspiration of their art and culture. […] For us, in these conditions, the struggle to preserve the national physiognomy of art—a treasure of the people—is imperative".[27] Although the speech as a whole does not concern itself with

[23] Ibid., p. 387.
[24] On these debates, see Isto, "'This Exhibition Will Go Down in Our History of Painting'".
[25] Andon Kuqali, "Me një synim të caktuar: Mbi disa probleme të arteve figurative", *Nëndori* vol. 20, no. 12, December 1972, p. 13.
[26] Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike", p. 395.
[27] Ibid., pp. 391–392.

elaborating national traditions or proposing an emphasis on forms of the people's art, it is at pains to emphasize that "tradition" should not be equated with "conservatism".[28]

Of course, Hoxha's speech—and its harsh dismissal of modernist stylistic experimentations—did not come from nowhere. As Ermir Hoxha has noted,[29] similar sentiments were expressed in aesthetician Alfred Uçi's article "Modernism: An Expression of the Degeneration of Bourgeois Artistic Culture",[30] and indeed Uçi's ideas—not only about modernism, but also about folk culture—have left an important mark on the path of culture in the 1970s. (I will return to this in greater detail below.) But the emphasis on the people's creativity—and specifically, folk traditions—had already been part of the dictator's rhetoric in the 1960s. In Enver Hoxha's famous open letter to the three sculptors of the Vlora *Independence Monument* (Rama, Dhrami, and Hadëri), published on the front page of *Drita* in July 1969, he had written: "When I visited your studio, I spoke to you about the importance of our country's miraculous folklore. I myself am an admirer of the people's folklore, and of all those sculptors, artists, poets, writers, and academics who believe in it, and are inspired by it."[31] Hoxha's preference for folk culture was already clear, then—indeed it had been even before the late 1960s. Thus, while the alarmist tone about the dangers of liberalization is

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[28] Ibid., p. 388.
[29] Ermir Hoxha, *Historia e Artit Shqiptar*, p. 187.
[30] Alfred Uçi, "Modernizmi—shprehje e degjenerimit të kulturës artistike borgjeze", *Drita*, 3 June 1970.
[31] Enver Hoxha, "Në gurrën e pashtershme e jetëdhënëse të krijimtarisë së popullit, do të gjejmë atë frymëzim të madh për të realizuar vepra të bukura e madhështore për popullin tonë," *Drita*, 13 July 1969.

arguably the novel element of the Fourth Plenum speech, it certainly does not read as a manifesto for a massive change in the direction of socialist art in Albania; if anything, Hoxha often reiterates the important progress made by cultural producers. (If we are looking for a published document that takes an openly condemnatory tone, naming specific cultural producers and the dangers in their works, a more useful example is "On Certain Problems in the Field of Figurative Arts", a report from the directory committee of the Union of Writers and Artists.[32])

What the speech did do was to narrow the possibilities for cultural maneuver. The momentum and militancy of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution is evidently still a priority, but a great number of the criticisms of conservatism that were credible in the arts until just months previously (criticisms that relied upon emphasizing the diversity of new experiences emerging in the building of socialism) became suspect, and Soviet art had already lost its legitimacy as a potential model.[33]

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[32] "Mbi disa probleme në fushën e arteve figurative (Nga raporti i kryesisë të Lidhjes së Shkrimtarëve dhe Artistëve të Shqipërisë të mbajtur në mbledhjen e plenumit të Komitetit drejtues)", *Drita*, 4 November 1973. The published report contains much in common with Kujtim Buza's report from April of the same year (before the Fourth Plenum); see Buza, "Disa probleme të arteve figurative në dritën e fjalimeve të shokut Enver", in Beqir Meta, Afrim Krasniqi, and Hasan Bello, eds., *Indoktrinimi komunist përmes kulturës, letërsisë dhe artit: Vëllimi II (1969–1973)*, Tiranë: Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike, Instituti i Historisë, 2019, pp. 303–311.

[33] For critiques of Soviet art of the Thaw period, see (for example), Andon Kuqali, "Art dhe revizionistë: shënime për artin sovjetik të viteve të fundit", *Nëntori* vol. 19, no. 5, May 1971, pp. 94–112; Pandi Mele, "Çfarë fshihet mbas 'traditave' në artin e sotëm figurativ revisionist?", *Drita*, 23 April 1978; and Alfred Uçi, "Kritika e estetikës revizioniste sovjetike", *Drita*, 20 August 1978.

The litmus test for revolutionary art was no longer the novelty of socialist life as reflected through the novelty of Socialist Realism; it was the proximity to mass culture, and mass culture increasingly meant certain forms that could be identified as traditional and national.

Fortunately, the infrastructure to produce credible knowledge and enthusiasm for such a national culture—developing over the past two decades—would see a heightened intensity in the 1970s. The fact that Hoxha's speech was received by the artistic elites of the period as a demand for a shift to a 'national' and 'traditional' framework can be seen in the discussion from the leadership of the Directory Committee of the artist's union, published in *Drita*, which contained a section entitled "To Base Our Work Strongly upon Our Traditions".[34]

[34] Fatos Kongoli and Pandi Mele, "Probleme aktuale në artet tona figurative (Nga mbedhja e plenumit të Komitetit Drejtues të Lidhjes së Shkrimtarëve dhe Artistëve)", *Drita*, 11 November 1973. While a complete bibliography of articles focusing on specifically national traditions in the arts is impossible to give, some other articles published in *Drita* in the years after the Fourth Plenum give a feel for the urgency of characterizing a national and folk style across a wide range of creative fields: see, among others, Dhimo Gogollari, "Artet e aplikuara dhe edukimi estetik", *Drita*, 5 May 1974; Vasil Konomi, "Për një fizionomi kombëtare në prodhimet e qelqit", *Drita*, 2 June 1974; Vangjush Valla, "Tradita dhe qeramika e sotme artistike", *Drita*, 5 January 1975; Fuat Dushku, "Vlera e kulturës së popullit", *Drita*, 16 March 1975; Hysen Sinani, "Duar të reja mbi motive të lashtë", *Drita*, 1 February 1976; Dhorka Dhamo, "Elementët etnografikë në pikturën mesjetare të Onufrit dhe Nikollës", *Drita*, 29 August, 1976; Andon Kuqali, "Album 'Arti popullor në Shqipëri'", *Drita*, 10 April 1977; Alfred Uçi, "Për një studim më të plotë të kulturës popullore", *Drita*, 24 April 1977; Nexhat Agolli, "Mendimi realist i popullit në një valle të lashtë", *Drita*, 18 September 1977; and Ruzhdi Qatipi, "Për një raport të drejtë në pasqyrimin e krijimtarisë popullore", *Drita*, 3 September 1978.

Among the artists cited in the summary of the plenary meeting was the sculptor Kristaq Rama, who emphasized the importance of the "miraculous art of the people, [of the] elevated taste, culture, and spiritual vitality of [the] nation, which we are lucky to have so pure and so alive, and which captivated us just two weeks ago in the invigorating parade in the castle in Gjirokastra".[35] (Here, Rama is referring to the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival, an event to which I return below). Alongside the study of socialist life, artists were now to turn ever more seriously towards the "continuous process" of the "understanding and study of tradition".[36]

Further evidence of this shift can be found in Andon Kuqali's article "Traces of Traditions in Our Figurative Arts",[37] which I think must be considered part of Kuqali's public self-criticism—given that his ideas and writings had been among those most specifically singled out for condemnation in the wake of the Fourth Plenum. Here, the critic who months earlier had declared the necessity of Albanian Socialist Realism incorporating influences from Cubism, and had condemned the schematism of official demands on art, turned his attention instead to the problem of basing contemporary visual artistic development on tradition. In the second part of the article, Kuqali names the problem: "As much as they [questions of tradition] are few in the case of the cultivated figurative arts, and as much as there have been discontinuities—sometimes for centuries—in

[35] Rama, qtd. in Kongoli and Mele, "Probleme aktuale në artet tona figurative".
[36] Ibid.
[37] Andon Kuqali, "Vazhdë traditash në artet tona figurative", *Drita,* 28 October 1973.

their development across history, still they are ancient and have their own specific, Albanian character".[38] Kuqali frames this effort positively, but put negatively, the challenge is clear: the ("cultivated") fine arts, as a product of modernity, are not primarily based on the continuity of traditions, and this is a particular problem in Albania, where the continuity of ancient cultural practices cannot be easily traced through visual culture. Of course, such a sentiment can only be implied, and Kuqali certainly conceals it, instead setting about doing the work that such a situation demands: to invent a tradition that could serve as the authentic foundation for the modern visual arts. In doing so, he focuses on aspects such as "ornamental rhythm, calligraphic care in the 'carving' of the form, and the feel of the material".[39] In any case, what is striking is the intentionality (and, in Kuqali's case, the performativity) of this effort: there is nothing inherent or natural in the work of seeking out tradition—it must be done with the same attention as the building of socialism.

III. Towards a National Folk Culture in the Arts

The construction of a national identity in Albania based on narratives about deep traditional continuity certainly did not begin in the 1970s,[40] but the 70s did see an intensified level of

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid. Of particular interest is the way Kuqali compares Kolë Idromeno's painting style to the process of carving, effectively shifting the aesthetic paradigm in which Idromeno's paintings are viewed in order to emphasize the working of material rather than the production of the image.

[40] For a chronology of the institutionalization of ethnography in socialist Albania, including the establishment of the journal *Albanian Archaeology* and *Albanian Ethnography* (both in 1961), and the Archaeological-Ethnographic

research into and discourse about both ancient history and folk traditions, and the continued institutionalization of these fields. In 1971, the biannual journal *Monumentet* (*Monuments*) began publication, led by the architect Gani Strazimiri, who had founded the Institute of Cultural Monuments (Instituti i Monumenteve të Kulturës, or IMK) in 1965. Containing articles analyzing new excavations and restoration practices, the journal reflected the growing interest in archaeology, a field that helped further ground narratives of Albanian national identity. The same year—1971—saw the publication of the impressive photobook *Shqipëria Arkeologjike* (*Archaeological Albania*),[41] and later that decade—in 1976—the Center for Archaeological Research was established in Tirana.[42] 1976 was the year that ethnographer Rrok Zojzi published *Arti Popullor në Shqipëri* (*People's Art in*

Museum, see Nebi Bardhoshi and Olsi Lelaj, *Etnografi në Diktaturë: Dija, Shteti dhe Holokausti Ynë*, Tirana: Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike, 2018, pp. 28–40.

[41] Muzafer Korkuti, et al., *Shqipëria Arkeologjike*, Tirana: Universiteti Shteteror i Tiranës, Instituti i Historisë dhe i Gjuhësisë, Sektori i Arkeologjisë, 1971.

[42] For an overview of archaeology during the 1970s and early 1980s, see Zhaneta Andrea, "Archaeology in Albania, 1973–83", *Archaeological Reports* no. 30, 1983–1984, pp. 102–119. See also Muzafer Korkuti and Karl M. Petruso, "Archaeology in Albania", *American Journal of Archaeology* vol. 97, no. 4, October 1993, pp. 703–743, and Michael L. Galaty and Charles Watkinson, "The Practice of Archaeology under Dictatorship", in Galaty and Watkinson, eds., *Archaeology under Dictatorship*, New York: Kluwer Academic, 2004, pp. 1–17. It should be noted that the development of a longer narrative about the continuity of Albanian art was not simply an internal matter; it was also a narrative exported to Western Europe, as in the exhibition *Albanian Art through the Centuries* (*Arti shqiptar ndër shekuj*), which opened in December of 1974 at the Petit Palais in Paris; see ATSh, "U hap ekspozita 'Arti shqiptar ndër shekuj'", *Drita*, 8 December 1974; and "Të zbulojmë artin shqiptar", *Drita*, 9 February 1975.

Albania),[43] and it was also the year that the exhibition *Kultura Popullore Shqiptare* (*People's Culture in Albania*) opened in Tirana.[44] As Armanda Hysa notes, 1976 represented the "peak" of the development of ethnography in state socialist Albania.[45] (We should remember that 1976 was also the year that Albania adopted its new constitution, consolidating many of the ideological and structural endeavors of the cultural revolution period and emphasizing national self-reliance—a concurrence that certainly reflects the direction of culture at the time.) The Institute of Folk Culture (Instituti i Kulturës Popullore) was established in 1979, and in 1980 it began publishing the journal *Kultura Popullore*.[46] Both the Institute and *Kultura Popullore* were helmed by the aesthetician Alfred Uçi, whose writings on Marxist-Leninist critiques of modernism and on folklore were instrumental in shaping discourse and policies on culture, especially in the 70s and 80s. Born in 1930, and trained in philosophy—and specifically aesthetics—in Moscow, Uçi had returned to Albania in the 1950s and took a position at the State

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[43] Rrok Zojzi, et al., *Arti Popullor në Shqipëri*, Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave e RP të Shqipërisë, Instituti i Historisë, Sektori i Etnografisë, 1976.

[44] See ATSh, "Ekspozita etnografike 'Kultura Popullore Shqiptare'", *Drita*, 4 July 1976; Abaz Dojaka, "Pasqyrë e bukur e kulturës sonë popullore", *Zëri i Popullit*, 13 August 1976; and Pëllumb Karkanaqe, "Thesari ynë kulturor në ekspozitën 'Kultura Popullore Shqiptare'", *Nëntori* vol. 24, no. 7, July 1977, pp. 147–160.

[45] Armanda Kodra-Hysa, "Albanian ethnography at the margins of history 1947–1991: Documenting the nation in historical materialist terms", in Aleksandar Bošković and Chris Hann, eds., *The Anthropological Field on the Margins of Europe, 1945–1991*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013, pp. 129–151, here 140.

[46] See Ermela Broci, "Bibliografia etnografike e revistës *Kultura Popullore* (1980–2016)", *Antropologji* vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 75–133.

University of Tirana at its founding in 1957. During the 70s decade, Uçi published three volumes on Marxist aesthetics—*Estetika, Jeta, Arti* (*Aesthetics, Life, Art*, 1970); *Probleme të Estetikës* (*Problems of Aesthetics*, 1976); and *Labirintët e Modernizmit* (*Labyrinths of Modernism*, 1978)—which helped establish a more foundational philosophical vocabulary for the emphasis on national culture.

It was also in the 1970s that the National Folklore Festival (which had first been held in Gjirokastra in 1968, beginning its traditional association with that city) received sustained critical attention, with the organization of a symposium dedicated to discussion of the 1973 edition.[47] (**Figs. 3–6**) In many ways, the second edition of the folk festival coming in October 1973 was fortuitously timed—it became the perfect touchstone for cultural producers looking for a way to frame the vitality and impact of the people's aesthetics in the wake of the Fourth Plenum (as Kristaq Rama did in his comments at the plenary meeting of the artist union's Directory Committee).[48] According to the statistics gathered on the festival, more than a third (38%) of the performers were villagers from cooperatives, but 20% were identified as coming from the industrial (urban) working classes, a statistic that Alfred Uçi would later cite as evidence of the expansion of traditional art practices beyond the sphere of the

[47] Abazi and Doja, p. 172. See also *Simpozium për problemet e Festivalit folklorik kombëtar të Gjirokastrës, tetor 1973: 14-15 qershor 1974*, Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave, Instituti i Folklorit, 1975.

[48] Rama, qtd. in "Mbi disa probleme në fushën e arteve figurative". Andon Kuqali also cited the example of the folk festival in his article on tracing traditions: Kuqali, "Vazhdë traditash".

village.[49] The location of the festival—the Gjirokastra castle—was also a frequent object of commentary: the "castle" as a metaphor for the Albanian nation contributed to the "powerful idea of resistance, of the force of the nation[, that] suffused the entire festival".[50]

In the spring and summer of 1976, a series of articles were published in the pages of *Drita* focused on the "national character" in architecture, beginning with Kujtim Buza's "Problems of National and Socialist Character in Architecture".[51] The articles ranged from considering the educative power of architecture,[52] to its connections with monumental sculpture,[53] to the role of decoration and the applied arts in the field of architecture,[54] to the study of vernacular architecture.[55] The construction of the National History Museum "Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu" in Kruja also took place in the late 1970s, with the museum's inauguration taking place in 1982 (although plans for this new museum started in the mid-1970s).[56] In Tirana, the

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[49] Uçi, "Vendi i artit popullor", p. 13.

[50] Fatos Kongoli and Thanas Dino, "Në ditët e festivalit", *Drita*, 14 October 1973.

[51] Kujtim Buza, "*Probleme të karakterit kombtar* [sic] *socialist në arkitekturë*", *Drita*, 7 March 1976.

[52] Sokrat Mosko, "Roli edukativ i veprave të arkitekturës", *Drita*, 4 April 1976.

[53] Perikli Çuli, "Skulptura monumentale dhe lidhja e saj me arkitekturën", *Drita*, 25 April 1976.

[54] Fatbardha Shkupi, "Dekoracionet popullore në arkitekturën e re", *Drita*, 9 May 1976.

[55] Aleksandër Meksi, "Studimi i krijimtarisë popullore në arkitekturë", *Drita*, 30 May 1976.

[56] See Enver Hoxha, "Ngritja e muzeut të Skënderbeut është ndërmarrje delikate dhe komplekse" [1975], in *Vepra* vol. 56, Tiranë: 8 Nëntori, 1987, pp. 145–150; and Gjergj Islami and Denada Veizaj, "Castle within a Castle:

National History Museum (plans for which similarly began in 1976) was inaugurated in 1981.[57] As Egin Ceka has argued, the Skanderbeg museum in Kruja, in particular, can be read as one of the key sites aiming to construct a civil religion of Albanian national identity,[58] and as such it could be seen as a part of the efforts to replace religious affiliations and identities with new forms of community in late socialist Albania (after the cultural revolution period).

The year 1978 saw the opening of three exhibitions devoted to major anniversaries: the 35th anniversary of the founding of the Women's Union (Bashkimi i Grave të Shqipërisë, BGSh, first established as the Bashkimi i Grave Antifashiste Shqiptare, BGASh, during the war), the 35th anniversary of the creation of the People's Army (Ushtria Popullore), and the 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren.[59] The exhibition commemorating the League's founding, which opened at the Palace of Culture in December of 1978,[60] presented a further opportunity to shape the narratives surrounding the legacies of Albanian ethno-national identity through the visual arts, given the important role the

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Modeling the National Identity through Architecture in the Fortress of Kruja", in Anna Marotta and Roberta Spallone, eds., *Defensive Architecture of the Mediterranean Vol. 8*, Turin: Politecnico di Torino, 2018, pp. 691–696.

[57] See Petraq Kolevica, *Arkitektura dhe Diktatura*, 2nd ed., Tiranë: Logoreci, 2004, pp. 228–238.

[58] Egin Ceka, "Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si Institucione të Religjionit Civil Shqiptar të Komunizmit", *Përpjekja* vol. 11, no. 21, Fall 2005, pp. 121–147.

[59] Jorgji Gjikopulli, "Ekspozitë kushtuar ngjarjeve të mëdha", *Drita*, 26 October 1978.

[60] ATSh (Albanian Telegraphic Agency), "U hap ekspozita kombëtare e arteve figurative kushtuar 100-vjetorit të Lidhjes Shqiptare të Prizrenit", *Drita*, 3 December 1978.

League played in the Albanian National Awakening. (**Fig. 7**) The League of Prizren was a political organization founded in 1878 in the eponymous city, with the goal of preserving the unity of Albanian lands within the Ottoman Empire from the effects of the Treaty of San Stefano, and later of the Congress of Berlin. The goals of the Albanian leaders (including religious figures, politicians and government officials, and tribal chiefs) present—the majority of whom were from Kosovo—ranged from protecting their lands by affirming their loyalty to the sultan, to more radical calls (by Abdyl Frashëri) to establish a sovereign Albanian nation-state.[61] In the years following the meeting, the efforts started there began to crystallize into a movement that emphasized linguistic, cultural, and national continuity, and appealed to the Ottoman government to support the call for an autonomous Albanian province.[62] When the Ottoman government did not respond positively to these calls, the Albanian organization shifted to armed resistance, an action which—although it was eventually defeated in 1881—came to symbolize the seed of the Albanian National Awakening.[63]

The anniversary of the League's founding did more than produce a plethora of artworks dedicated to the major figures of

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[61] George Gawrych, *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam, and the Albanians, 1874–1913*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, pp. 45–47.
[62] Ibid., pp. 52–53.
[63] Ibid., pp. 68–69. In a parallel trajectory, the connection between the National Awakening-era thinkers and the study of folklore also helped establish a continuity between that earlier period and the present: the interest that writers like Jeronim de Rada had shown in folklore was both evidence of their nationalist credentials, and evidence that the socialist project of folkloric study built upon a significant precedent. See Uçi, "Vendi i artit popullor", p. 7.

the National Awakening period.[64] It also created an opportunity for Albanian artists to re-establish ties with the Autonomous Province of Kosovo in neighboring Yugoslavia. For example, artists Guri Madhi and Kujtim Buza traveled to Kosovo in 1978 as part of the celebration of the anniversary and an exchange between the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists and the Association of Figurative Arts of Kosovo.[65] Buza and Madhi visited Prizren, Gjakova (from whence Buza's family originated), and Deçan, and subsequently opened an exhibition in Tirana, entitled *Impressions of Travels among Kosovo's Historic Places*. An exhibition of applied arts from Kosovo also opened in the Palace of Culture in Tirana the same year, featuring the work of artists like Muslim Mulliqi, Rexhep Ferri, Agim Çavdarbasha, Simon Shiroka, and Violeta Xhaferri.[66] Çavdarbasha's sculptures of Abdyl Frashëri and Ymer Prizreni attracted particular attention, precisely because they were connected to the history of Albanian identity and nationhood in the region, but it is also interesting that the theme of the exhibition overall focused on the applied arts, connecting the work of Kosovar artists to legacies of folk art and the use of

[64] See, for example, the accounts of the exhibition in Gjergj Frashëri, "Portrete trimash", *Drita*, 7 January 1979; Abaz Hado, "Parafytyrimeve të bukura të patriotëve dhe luftëtarëve të lirisë", *Drita*, 28 January 1979; and Kristaq Rama, "Heroizmi popullor në skulpturat e një ekspozite", *Drita*, 15 April 1979.

[65] See "Motive nga Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit," *Drita*, 24 September 1978; "U hap ekspozita e arteve figurative 'Përshtypje udhëtimi nëpër vende historike të Kosovës'", *Drita*, 19 November 1978; and Dalan Shapllo, "Historia flet me gjuhën e pictures", *Drita*, 26 November 1978.

[66] Fuat Dushku, "Ekspozitë me punime të artistëve nga Kosova", *Drita*, 27 August 1978.

traditional materials such as wood and metal in decorative contexts.[67]

IV. Traditions, Collective Artistic Production, and Aesthetic Totality

Events such as the two editions of the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival (in 1973 and 1978), the debates on the national character of architecture in 1976, and the hundredth anniversary of the League of Prizren in 1978 help illustrate the effort to consolidate a nationalist narrative that tied state socialist Albania's resistance to both capitalism and Soviet revisionism to the legacy of rural folk culture and ethno-national mobilizing during the late Ottoman period. Of course, such directions were not entirely new: they had been forecasted by events such as the inauguration of the Skanderbeg statue in Tirana in 1968, an event that indelibly linked Enver Hoxha to the figure of the medieval hero. In many ways, this proliferation of discourse around national character, national heroes, and folk traditions can be seen as a continuation of the policies of the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, especially those aspects of it aimed at doing away with 'backwards practices' (*zakone prapanike*) and beliefs (including religion).[68] Specifically, it was part of an ongoing process of navigating and discovering *which* traditions were to be discarded,[69] and which ones were to be actively encouraged

[67] Ibid.
[68] On this aspect of the cultural revolution, see Ylber Marku, "Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and Lessons from History," *Art Studies* no. 21, 2022, pp. 39–88, here 68–74.
[69] Kodra-Hysa, p. 139.

and constructed as the groundwork for the ongoing building of socialism: as Hoxha stated, "We must preserve that which is good, that which belongs to the people, […] and purge that which—in either form or content—has been infiltrated by the ideology and influence of the ruling classes […]".[70]

But it was not simply a matter of delving into, of discovering, folklore and the people's traditions; it was also a matter of understanding these phenomena aesthetically, of being able to interpret them within the framework of the cultivation of mass taste and collective experience. In September of 1973, just a few months after the Fourth Plenum, Alfred Uçi laid out the importance of this project—of understanding folk creative production not only ethnographically, but also aesthetically—in an article in *Drita* entitled "The Place of Folklore and its Role in Socialist Artistic Culture".[71] Here, he argued that folklore possessed a "superiority" vis-à-vis "cultivated art" because of the "syncretism […] of collective artistic production" that characterized folk art.[72] Using the example of a traditional folk wedding, he writes that in the course of such an event "the poetic-literary element, the choreographic, musical, decorative, and theatrical or dramatic elements, etc., all blend together into one, and develop into a colossal emotional force, one that holds sway over a great number of people and makes the event one that they remember for a substantial length of time".[73] Essentially, Uçi is

[70] Enver Hoxha, qtd. in Rozeta Uçi, *Edukimi Estetik në Shkollë*, Tiranë: Instituti i Studimeve Pedagogjike, 1974, p. 105.
[71] Alfred Uçi, "Vendi i folklorit dhe roli i tij në kulturën artistike socialiste", *Drita*, 23 September 1973 and 30 September 1973 (published in two parts).
[72] Alfred Uçi, "Vendi i folklorit", *Drita*, 30 September 1973.
[73] Ibid.

suggesting that the traditional performances and collective gatherings of the people are the ideal example of the total work of art: in bringing together so many different forms of culture, and in exercising such an effective emotional hold over participants and spectators, folk rituals like the wedding are the perfect model for effective and persuasive mass culture. The fusion of art and life that was the promise of both avant-garde modernism and Socialist Realism is here attributed to the traditional cultural practices of the people. To be clear, Uçi does not believe that folk practices will—or should—replace "cultivated art"; quite the opposite—he believes that the development of socialist society results in a collective subject (the people) able to both create and aesthetically grasp both folkloric culture and institutionalized art.[74]

One important challenge, of course, was that cultural practices like folk weddings were defined precisely by their limited geographic distribution: they were associated with rurality, and with the peasant classes, and as such they possessed only an uneasy relationship to the experiences of the industrial (urban) working classes. Thinkers like Uçi tried to address this discrepancy by arguing that the "people's art" was expanding its societal distribution. Writing in 1976,[75] Uçi claimed that, "The people's art has now surpassed its narrow confines, the idea that it is mostly produced by villagers and craftspeople; it now emerges from all corners of socialist life—it is born and lives in

[74] Ibid.

[75] It should be noted that Uçi already makes similar arguments about the expansion of folkloric knowledge and practice throughout socialist (urban, industrial) society in his 1973 article, but the passage from his 1976 article describes the phenomenon more poetically.

the new village, but also in factories and work sites. The real bearers of folkloric knowledge [today] are the villagers working in cooperatives and the industrial workers, teachers and farm workers, machinery fitters and students, intellectuals and miners".[76] At the same time, the people's art was also transformed in step with the changes endemic to socialist life: in the same article, Uçi argued that "the ubiquitous changes that have taken place in the lives of the people during the construction of socialism cannot but leave their mark on folklore and its evolution".[77] Thus, the modernization of socialist society and the contact of the masses with each other had rendered the idea of folk culture as a 'separate' sphere obsolete.[78]

In this process, the aesthetic totality of the people's art would overcome any perceived opposition to "cultivated art" in a dialectical movement. The introduction of the "people's art" into a dialectical relationship with "cultivated art" (and thus with Socialist Realism, a method that—for all its supposed organic relation to socialist reality—was still clearly associated with an academic history) also allowed for a more direct theorization of the totality of cultural experience as an aspect of socialist Albanian society.[79] This framework, which would ever more explicitly treat the whole of socialist society as an aesthetic

[76] Uçi, "Vendi i artit popullor", pp. 12–13.
[77] Alfred Uçi, "Vendi i folklorit", *Drita*, 30 September 1973.
[78] Alfred Uçi, "Vendi i folklorit", *Drita*, 23 September 1973.
[79] It is not accidental, I suspect, that Uçi's prominence as a theorist of culture in the 1970s also has to do with the possibilities of *aesthetics* (on which he was one of relatively few authors in Albania writing at the time)—as opposed to *art*—as a concept that might sanction the total interpenetration of political power and society. But this is a much longer argument, and one that goes beyond on the scope of what can be discussed here.

phenomenon that could be understood in terms of intersubjective emotional and sensory experiences, was not new in state socialist society, or even in Albania, but I think that the 1970s saw the most sustained efforts to characterize this condition.

This is perhaps the place to reflect briefly on the way these transformations related to the famous Stalinist formula that culture should be "socialist in content and national in form". As some authors have pointed out, in more marginal spaces of the socialist world, this conceptualization was inverted, resulting in artworks that were effectively "socialist in form, national in content"—that is, in which institutionalized forms of art-making (such as Socialist Realism) were adapted to tell stories that more directly spoke to identities best understood as national.[80] (Indeed, this inversion of the formula has been applied to Albania as well, though not with any specific reference to art.[81]) In Albania in the 70s decade, however, I would argue that we see not just the inversion of the initial directive, but the dissolution of this dichotomy. The point, increasingly, was not to differentiate form and content, but to show how the revolutionary development of socialist society was causing them to become inextricably intertwined.

Interestingly (at least in terms of "cultivated art"), we see this new condition thematized not in debates about painting, but

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[80] See, for example, Karolina Kluczewska, "Socialist in Form, 'National' in Content? Art and Ideology in Soviet Tajikistan", *Nationalities Papers* vol. 50, no. 2, March 2022, pp. 372–394.

[81] See Bernd J. Fischer, "Enver Hoxha and the Stalinist Dictatorship in Albania", in Bernd J. Fischer, ed. *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeast Europe,* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007, p. 253.

in those about monumental sculpture. A particularly poignant example is a 1977 talk given by sculptor Shaban Hadëri (one of the three creators of the Vlora *Independence Monument*), entitled "The Monumentality of Our Socialist Life and Its Reflection in Sculpture".[82] The title of the talk itself succinctly summarizes Hadëri's claim: that monumentality is not primarily an attribute of artworks, but of socialist life itself—it is an aesthetic phenomenon that springs from the new and dynamic relationships of socialist society.[83] Here, we might return to the juxtaposition with which I began: the image of the three sculptors of the Vlora monument appearing opposite an arrangement of craft objects. This concise visual pairing reinforced the shared emphasis on specifically national history and identity that would characterize Albanian art in the 70s decade, but it also drew attention to the importance of *collective* cultural production, a characteristic that monumental sculpture fortuitously shared with so many examples of the "people's art".[84] The "monumentality of socialist life" was—like the folk wedding Uçi described—characterized by syncretism, the dynamic relation between the experiences of building a new life—new cities, new villages—and the corollary creation of traditions upon which those novel experiences could be grounded. The authenticity of these new national traditions was of course artificially constructed, but so are all traditions, and we should not ignore the complexities of

[82] Shaban Hadëri, "Monumentaliteti i jetës sonë dhe pasqyrimi i tij në skulpturë," *Nëntori* vol. 24, no. 5, May 1977, pp. 246–248.
[83] Hadëri, p. 248.
[84] On the importance of collective endeavor as part of the process of creating monumental sculpture, see Isto, "The Dictator Visits the Studio", pp. 505–508.

the cultural and political field that artists, critics, and aestheticians navigated in this period of Albania's history.

V. Conclusion

Even if Albania's connections to the rest of the socialist world became more limited as the 1970s progressed, there were still significant examples of exchange and the spirit of socialist internationalism. For most of the decade, Albania was still allied with China, and it is clear that instances of cultural exchange were numerous, at least until 1978. In fact, before the exhibition *Kultura Popullore Shqiptare* opened in summer 1976, an exhibition of artisanal objects from the People's Republic of China had opened in Tirana in January of that same year, making a significant impression in the press.[85] (**Fig. 8**) At the same time, exhibitions of Albanian art in countries like Algeria[86] and China,[87] alongside the visits of theater troupes such as the West German agitprop group from Hamburg, Red Megaphone,[88] as well as continued coverage of artists in nations like Vietnam and Palestine, and the abovementioned exchanges with Kosovo (then part of Yugoslavia) show that state socialist Albania's cultural

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[85] See Pandi Mele and Sami Curku, "Krijime të bukura me përmbajtje kombëtare e frymë socialiste", *Drita*, 11 January 1976, and Fuat Dushku, "Një ekspozitë me vlera të mëdha", *Nëntori* vol. 23, no. 2, February 1976, pp. 216–219.

[86] Jorgji Gjikopulli and Ksenofon Kostaqi, "Manifestim i bukur i arteve tona: Përshtypjet e të huajve për ekspozitë e arteve tona figurative në Algjeri", *Drita*, 2 October 1977.

[87] "Miqtë për Shqipërinë: 'Popull heroik, art luftarak'", *Drita*, 23 November 1975.

[88] Gjergji Pani, "Art revolucionar: Shënime për shfaqjet e grupit artistik të Shoqatës së miqësisë Gjermani-Shqipëri", *Drita*, 30 July 1978.

policy in this decade was not completely isolationist: even if the rhetoric of global socialist revolution was no longer credible, Albanian solidarity with select nations within the decolonizing world continued to be a priority.[89] Rather than seeing the turn towards nationalist and folk themes in these years as emblematic of the severance of political and cultural ties with other parts of the socialist world, we might read them (as Christianna Bonin does—in the case of the generation of artists participating in the national revival in Kazakhstan in the 1970s) as "a search for local heritage *as a means to connect* with an expanding world".[90] Even if the contours of these connections were now more strictly delimited, they nonetheless clearly shaped at least some of the approaches taken by thinkers in the politically precarious situation after the Fourth Plenum.

Within the critical discourses on the arts, debates about painting took a marked backseat in the later 1970s to debates on architecture, monumental sculpture, and the applied arts,[91] as

[89] A more thorough study on the history of exhibition-making in Albania—especially on the history of Albanian exhibitions of art, applied arts, and folk culture that travelled abroad in this period—is sorely needed. As more studies begin to examine the positioning of other 'peripheral' socialist nations during late socialism, especially through the lens of culture (such as Theodora K. Dragostinova's *The Cold War Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021) perhaps the significance of Albanian cultural policy in these years will also become clearer.

[90] Bonin, p. 37.

[91] It is also possible to read the increasing associations of the applied arts with tradition, with the "people's art", as an effort to control the influence of the decorative arts from professors like Danish Jukniu and Ksenofon Dilo, whose Central European, Bauhaus-inflected education had also been part of the shift in aesthetic discourses that led to the modernist experimentations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although Jukniu and Dilo were by no means purged

well as dance and music. Thus, the lively arguments of the late 1960s and early 70s about the legacies of Western European modernism (and especially modernist painting) and Soviet Socialist Realism were minimized after 1973. The attention to sculpture largely avoided debates about color (which had proven central to concerns about new directions in painting), and architecture allowed attention to questions of form (including national and vernacular forms) without delving into debates about modernism and formalism in connection with abstraction. Thus, while avoiding questions about painting was assuredly not the only reason for expanding the discussion of these fields during the 1970s, there were clear ways that the logic of these debates made particular sense after the Fourth Plenum.

It is also worth keeping in mind another aspect of the broader, global context: it was in the early 1970s (and specifically, as Nikolas Drosos argues, at *documenta 5*) that the "negotiations between world art, modernism, and indeed, realism" definitively ended, in the Western art world, at least. As Drosos points out, in 1972, "Western contemporary art was neither articulated in opposition to realism [Socialist or otherwise] nor construed as an endpoint for an all-encompassing fiction of world art. In the minds of Western curators, critics, and viewers, it was the *only* possible art".[92] However distant the art world of state socialist Albania might have been from this

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from the ranks of the artist's union, we can imagine that the nationalist flavor of discourses about the applied arts pre-empted any future possibility that modernist aesthetics could return via debates about the abstraction of decorative form.

[92] Nikolas Drosos, "Modernism and World Art, 1950–72", *ARTMargins* vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 55–76, here 75.

context, I think it is not too far-fetched to see the emphasis on national traditions and the "people's art" as part of a reaction against the perceived loss of alternatives to Western modernism in the Cold War world more broadly. If both "world art" and Socialist Realism had lost their credibility (for different reasons, and to different audiences), a new kind of artistic framework needed to be constructed, and one that could provide an alternative to capitalist culture. Cultural thinkers in state socialist Albania sought to position an increasingly nationally specific art within this global context, and even if they were unable to impact the debates that took place elsewhere on the boundaries of the Cold War, we should not dismiss their efforts as completely naïve, misguided, or retrograde. As Christine I. Ho has argued, shifting the historical focus to craft and applied arts in accounts of the Cold War "decenters the Soviet core and a dichotomy of national/international in favor of a more dispersed and multipolar conception of socialist visual culture in its claims to a world-making enterprise".[93] The case of Albania does not substantially break us away from national frameworks—rather, the construction of national identity became even more central to Albanian artists in the period that this article has examined. But the turn to the "people's art"—crafts, the applied arts, and folk traditions of cultural expression—does indeed move us away from the straightforward dichotomy of (Soviet) Socialist Realism against Western modernism and neo-avant-garde developments.

Finally, the overt nationalism of art in 1970s Albania invites us to consider the commodification of national heritage in the present, the undeniable recent shift—especially evident in

[93] Ho, p. 1020.

Albania during the last decade—towards emphasizing arguably kitsch forms of heritage for their touristic appeal. As part of a nation-branding scheme that has become increasingly widespread with the continued expansion of tourist industries across former Eastern Europe and the Global South, it is certainly not surprising to see Albania's Ministry of Culture placing ever more emphasis on projects that relate to heritage, national specificity, and folk culture and crafts. If the turn to national and folk identity in the 1970s coincided problematically with the severing of ties with the rest of the socialist world, it was at least still premised upon a vision of the world in which urban and rural working classes were fundamentally united in both cultural and political struggles, and in which the practices of the people could be mobilized for anti-imperial and anti-(neo)colonial struggle. The contemporary moment is quite different, almost the inverse: If "socialism [had] made the working people the sole creative subject"—as Alfred Uçi proclaimed in the epigraph to this article—then the performance of nationally specific identity as part of global neoliberal tourism reflects the way that the 'authentic' national subject of global geographic and economic peripheries has now been transformed completely into a commodity. It is difficult to see the possibilities for emancipation in this contemporary moment, just as it must have been increasingly difficult to see the opportunities for emancipation as the "people's art" became an ever more totalizing (and thus potentially empty) signifier in the wake of the Fourth Plenum in 1973.

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Fig. 1. Interior spread of *Socialist Albania on the March* (*Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*, 1969), with photographs of the sculptors at work on the Vlora *Independence Monument* and a collection of artisanal wares.

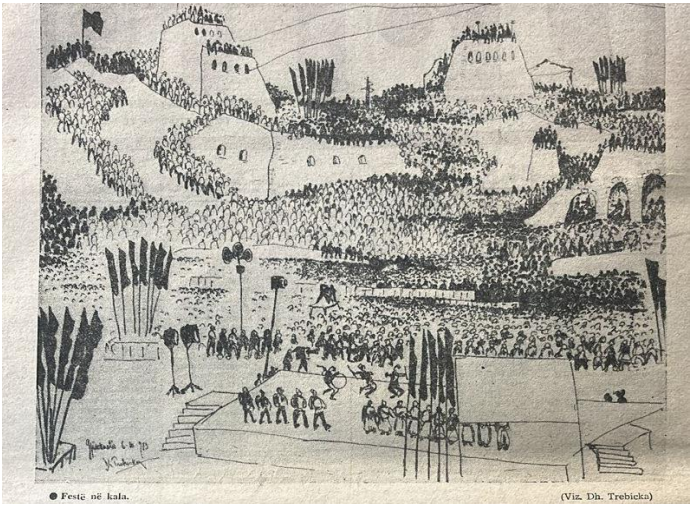
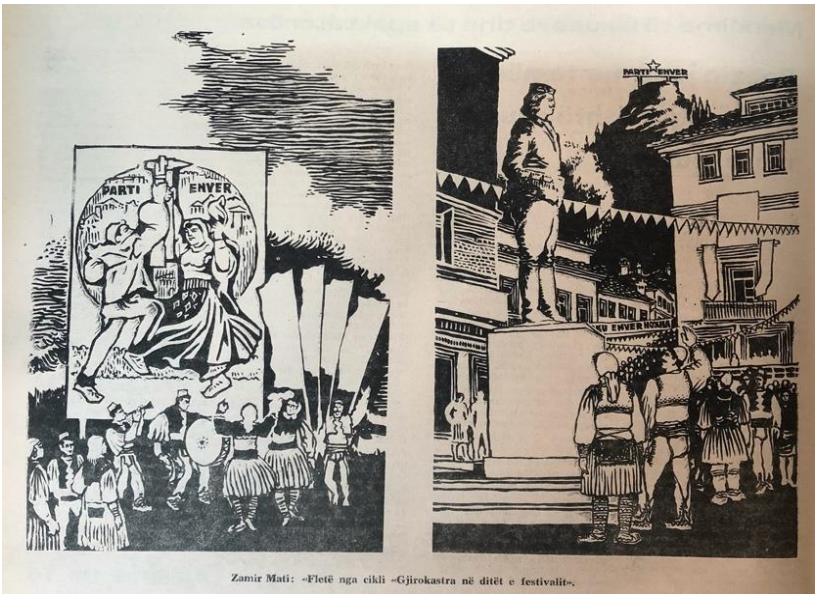
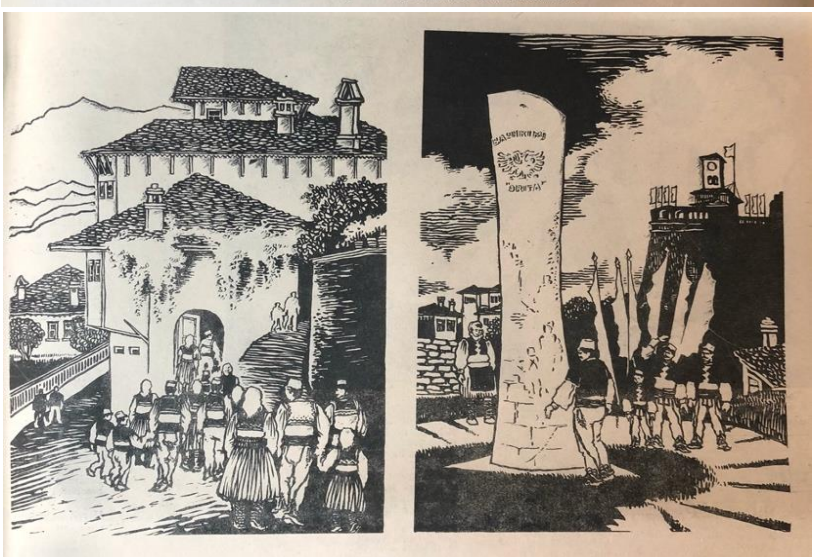


Fig. 2. Dhimitraq Trebicka, *Festë në kala* (*Festival in the Castle*). Drawing published in *Drita*, 14 October 1973.



Zamir Mati: «Fletë nga cikli «Gjirokastra në ditët e festivalit».



Figs. 3–6. Zamir Mati, images from the cycle *Gjirokastra në ditët e festivalit* (*Gjirokastra during the Festival*). Prints published in *Drita*, 22 October 1978.

Fig. 7. Exhibition view of the exhibition dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren, opened in 1978. Published in *Ylli*, January 1979, p. 16.

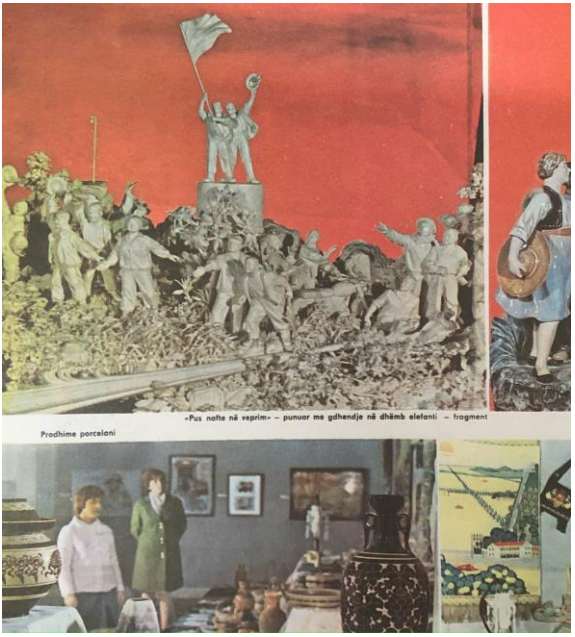


Fig. 8. Images from the exhibition of artisanal objects from the People's Republic of China, opened in 1976. Published in *Ylli*, February 1976.