

# Albanian Culture



<http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/albania/>

Researched by

Vicky Cyr  
Michelle Irwin  
Karin Hardy

Consultation by

Van Christo

Fall 2005

## **I. Description of Culture**

### **A. Demographics**

- In 1967 a flux of Albanian immigrants entered the United States when religion was outlawed in Albania.
- Preceding 1990, the majority of Albanians who entered the United States were avoiding the instability of their country's political régime.
- According to the 2000 Census, 113,661 people of Albanian descent are living in the United States. Current population estimates range from 250,000 to 500,000 people including both legal and illegal immigrants.
- The five states with the largest population of Albanians are New York, Michigan, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Connecticut.
- According to the 2000 Census, 649 Albanians reside in the state of Maine.

### **B. Brief History**

- On November 28, 1912, Albania proclaimed its independence from the Ottoman Empire.
- From 1944 until 1990 Albania was a Communist country.
- Religion was prohibited from 1967 to 1990. All churches and mosques were shut down and religious practices were prohibited in an effort to promote nationalism.
- In 1991 the country's name was changed from People's Republic of Albania to the Republic of Albania.
- Between 1990 and 1992 Albania ended its 47 year Communist Rule and established a multiparty democracy.
- In May of 1999 Serb forces invaded Kosovo, whose population was 90% Albanian. The incident consisted of mass murders and massacres. Hundreds of thousands of Albanians fled from their homes.

### **C. Foods**

- Most traditional Albanian food consists of vegetables, spices, meats, and fish.
- Olives, grapes, oregano, and mullet are some of the ingredients that make up the distinctive taste of Middle-eastern cuisine.
- Classic Albanian food is considered by many chefs to be of Turkish origin.
- Albanian food also borrows tastes from Italian and Greek culture.
- Muslim Albanians may not consume pork or drink alcohol due to religious beliefs.

### **D. Dress**

- Traditionally, clothing for women consisted of bright and colorful embroidery. Mostly shirts and dresses were worn, but in some regions loose fitting pants were socially acceptable.
- Older women still commonly dress in traditional wear.

- Traditional clothing for men includes a white kilt, called a *fustan/fustanella*. It is worn with a long-sleeved jacket or vest and a white felt hat. The hats come in a variety shapes according to the different regions in Albania.
- Traditional dress is still worn at cultural celebrations, especially on Independence Day (November 28).
- At weddings and dance festivals people may wear traditional dress.
- Due to government shifts to a more democratic control, westernized dressing options are available.
- Today the western world has come to Albania. Young adults wear jeans, miniskirts, and shop at the GAP®.

#### **E. Language/Communication**

- Official language is Albanian (a romance language)
- Two dialects: Gheg in the North and Tosk in the South
- Division of dialects was common before WWII; after WWII official standard dialect became Tosk. Differences between dialects have virtually disappeared.
- Children are typically taught both Albanian and English.
- Use many physical gestures, such as hand motions.
- Hug and kiss upon greeting- (Actual contact of lips is not as important as the contact of cheek and cheek. Regardless, an audible kissing noise is made.)
- Traditionally, head nods are reversed. Vertical head nod means no, and horizontal head shake means yes.
- Head nods have evolved over time. (A left/right tilt-nod can be interpreted as yes, but means no. It expresses disagreement and confusion. In contrast, a vertical nod means no and expresses agreement and understanding.)
- Hospitality considered very important. Albania is noted as the most hospitable country in Europe. Strangers can expect to be well received and treated as a friend.
- Loyalty also valued. A *besa* is a pledged word. Even war and death will not keep an Albanian from keeping his or her word.

#### **F. Religion**

- No official statistics exist because religion was outlawed for so long.
- Albanians typically affiliate themselves with Muslim (70%), Orthodox Christian (20%), and Roman Catholic (10%) religions.
- Most Muslim Albanians are traditional “Sunnis”: ¼ belong to Bektashi sect (Unorthodox order).
- Extraordinary religious tolerance.
- The religious divisions are not significant: members of the same family sometimes belong to different religions.

- When religion was outlawed in 1967, Albania became the world's first officially atheist country.
- Religious institutions were either destroyed or converted and used as gymnasiums, movie theaters, and warehouses.
- Albanian people identify themselves as Albanian first, and by their religious affiliation second.

### **G. Holidays**

- Dates of Muslim holidays vary each year, because the Muslims use the lunar calendar, in which the year is only 345 days long.
- *Small Bajram/Bayram*: Islamic holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan. Muslim Albanians celebrate with feasts and family gatherings.
- *Summer Day*: ancient Pagan holiday celebrated in mid-March.
- *Nevruz*: celebrated in March to mark the first day of the year.
- *Mother Teresa Day*: celebrated October 19, to commemorate the day of her beatification.
- *Big Bajram/Bayram*: Celebrating the memory of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God.
- *Independence Day/Albanian Flag Day*: November 28- celebration of independence, declared on November 28, 1912.
- *Liberation Day/National Day*: November 29- celebrating liberation from German and Italian troops at the end of WWII.
- Christian Albanian's also celebrate Christmas and Easter. Christmas also marks the annual Albanian Music Festival in Tirana.
- Weddings, funerals, births, engagements, birthdays, and job promotions are some occasions in which friends and family get together to celebrate.

### **H. Family, Relationships and Roles**

- Traditionally women were expected to stay at home and to obey their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Under the communist government, however, women were emancipated.
- Since 1945, girls and women have been encouraged to attend school and establish a career outside the home. Many of the country's doctors and teachers are women.
- Men typically play a main role in management of major decisions pertaining to the family, though this practice has begun to change.
- Men and boys "do the xhiro" (an evening walk around town), socialize, go to cafes, play billiards, and are allowed to come home after dark.
- Socializing is very important and visiting is common in the evenings.
- The family is considered to be the most stable institution.
- Fatherhood is determined by marriage. The mother's husband is the father of a child born during the marriage, or a child born within 300 days after the dissolution of marriage (Even if the biological father may be different).

- Domestic violence is seen as a private matter between husband and wife, and is not addressed by public policies. As more laws are enacted in Albania, this practice has begun to change.
- Traditionally, several generations lived in the same household due to financial constraints. Today if financially able, young couples may prefer to live alone.

### **III. Concepts of Work/Play/Time**

- Businesses typically open at 7am, close at lunch for a siesta, then reopen at 4pm and stay open until 7pm.
- Albanians tend to be very social people.
- The use of oral and musical folklore is a big part of Albanian cultural history. Music and stories are very important in this culture and for many years they provided a means for maintaining their history.
- They enjoy rural art and folk crafts such as woodworking and weaving.
- Albanians experience the 5-day work-week (relief from the 6-day work-week that was typical under communism).
- Currently, about 30% of Albania's population is unemployed. Men and women share equal percentages of unemployment.

### **IV. Health and Wellness**

- Illness of an individual is a concern of the entire family.
- Albanians may believe that illness is caused by unfavorable climate, poor eating, or physical or psychological oppression.
- Due to lack of familiarity with mental illness, Albanians may believe it stems from evil.
- Family and nation take priority over self, with family carrying even more weight than nation.
- Albanians believe that telling the patient directly of the condition may make it worse.

### **V. Challenges to Health Care**

- Due to the displacement of Albanian population, individuals may not have medical records.
- As recent as 1996, anarchists in Albania engaged in burning official documents of government institutions, including hospitals records.
- Traditional family organization is strongly patriarchal; men generally make the major decisions.
- May not want to bathe or wash their hair due to the belief that they may get sick.
- Albanians may be reluctant to seek services due to infrequent utilization of healthcare in their native country. Therefore, Albanians may present with chronic conditions due to poor medical care.
- Albanians may not consider preventative care as valuable.

- Verbal agreements (*besa*) taken **very** seriously and may be considered slights of honor if not adhered to.

## **VI. Suggestions for Health Care Providers**

- Respect cultural traditions of family value.
- Be prepared for a large amount of visitors.
- Be prepared for visitors bringing food.
- Explain the importance of the patient playing an active role in recovery.
- Ask the patient who they want to have included in the medical decisions.
- When sharing information be very clear and upfront, and say only what is certain.
- Be considerate about conveying information, and communicate with the patient as to who should receive that information.
- Remember the differences in communication style such as the reversed head nods and gestural communication.
- Explain purpose of touch before approaching the patient.
- Consider dietary concerns of ethnic population, especially during times of celebration, when fasting is commonly practiced.
- Clients may want the room unusually warm and windows closed because it is believed that cold air and harsh elements cause sickness. This belief is beginning to change.

## References

- Brody, M. (2003). Albania and Albanians in the United States. Retrieved October 6, 2005, from <http://www2.bc.edu/~brisk/albania.htm>
- Christo, V. (2002). Albania and the Albanians. Retrieved November 4, 2005, from [http://www.geocities.com/murati\\_kled/albanians.htm](http://www.geocities.com/murati_kled/albanians.htm)
- CIA. (2005). The world factbook – Albania. Retrieved September 24, 2005, from <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>
- Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. (1994). Albania: a country study. Retrieved September 24, 2005, from <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/gdc/entrystd.al>
- iExplore (2005). Albania travel guide. Retrieved October 6, 2005, from <http://www.iexplore.com/dmap/Albania>
- Information Please Database (2005). Albania. Retrieved September 24, 2005, from <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/a0107268.html>
- Kersis, A. J. & Marth, J. J. (n.d.) Albania: Albanian social gestures. Retrieved November 22, 2005, from <http://www.internationalspecialreports.com/europe/albania/albaniansocialgestures.html>
- Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia. (2005). Albania. Retrieved September 24, 2005, from [http://encarta.msn.com/text\\_761564\\_0/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/text_761564_0/Albania.html)
- Photius Coutsoukis. (2004). Albania- society index. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.photius.com/countries/albania/society/index.html>
- Sluzki, C.E., & Agani, F.N. (2003). Small steps and big leaps in an era of cultural

- transition: A crisis in a traditional Kosovar Albanian family. *Family Process*, 42(4), 479-484.
- Stover, E. (1999). A Village Destroyed. Retrieved October 6, 2005, from [http://www.hrcberkeley.org/specialprojects/avillagedestroyed/printer\\_exile.html](http://www.hrcberkeley.org/specialprojects/avillagedestroyed/printer_exile.html)
- Sustainable Economic Development Agency (n.d.). Traditional culture in Albania. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.seda.org.al/ACH/cult.htm>
- Weinberg, H. (1975). Patient relations: Staff overcomes cultural barriers to care. *The Journal of the American Hospital Association*, 49(16), 60-65.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2001). Albanian values. Retrieved November 22, 2005, from [http://www.al.undp.org/country\\_brief/albanian\\_values.htm](http://www.al.undp.org/country_brief/albanian_values.htm)
- United States Census Bureau. (2000). Census 2000 Summary. Retrieved October 6, 2005, from [http://factfinder.census.gov/qtable?-geo\\_id=04000us23&-qt\\_name=dec\\_2000\\_sf3\\_u\\_qtp13&-ds\\_name=dec\\_2000\\_sf3\\_u](http://factfinder.census.gov/qtable?-geo_id=04000us23&-qt_name=dec_2000_sf3_u_qtp13&-ds_name=dec_2000_sf3_u)
- University of Washington Medical Center, Staff Development Group, Patient and Family Education Committee. (2004). Culture clues: Communicating with your Albanian patient. Retrieved on October 31, 2005, from [http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/pdf/AlbanianCultureClue4\\_05.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/pdf/AlbanianCultureClue4_05.pdf)