

The ‘queen bee’ of the highlands: An etymological analysis of the Albanian *xhubleta*

Lindon Dedvukaj*

Abstract. The Albanian *xhubleta* (indefinite *xhubletë*) is a traditional dress worn by women in the isolated northern highland regions of Albania and Kosovo. It is considered to be one of the oldest traditional folk costumes in the Balkans. Many scholars have noted the ancient features of the dress (Coon 1950: 15-16; Stipčević 1977: 90; Belkaïd 2013; Gjokaj 2021: 81-2, vol. I). The only proposed etymology for the word *xhubleta* is found in Topalli (2017: 1604-5), which posits it as loan from Turkish. Difficult from both the phonological and morphological perspective, I posit a different etymology, with regular phonological change from the Indo-European starting point of **h₁sú-melit* ‘having good honey’, a possessive adjectival compound type found elsewhere within the Indo-European language family. Relevant to this proposal is the specialized status of the bee in the Albanian law code, the *Kanun*, the aesthetically similar appearance of the *xhubleta* with the Cretan skirt (Belkaïd 2013: 12), and the Greek myth of the goddess of ‘bees and honey’ Melissa, who nourished the infant Zeus on the island of Crete. All of these may indicate an ancient origin of the *xhubleta*.

Keywords. Albanian *xhubleta*; Indo-European **h₁sú-melit*; bee-mythology; Greek mythology

1. The Albanian *xhubleta*. The Albanian *xhubleta* is ancient type of dress on the shores of the Mediterranean that has only survived in a limited zone of northern Albania (Gjergji 2004: 150). The traditional dress is most famously seen in the northernmost areas of Malësia e Madhe and Dukagjin. Since the 1930’s middle-aged women began to replace the traditional *xhubleta* with a skirt of black cloth. And with the changing of traditional patterns during the socialist period of the 1950’s, the use and production of the *xhubleta* have decreased.¹ Today it is no longer worn and has only survived as a ceremonial costume for weddings and other celebrations.

The first component of the *xhubleta* is the large trapezoidal or undulated bell skirt which stretches from the waist down to the feet. This is accompanied by the *kërdhokla* or *brezi i gjânë* ‘a wide leather sash’, the *përparja* or *pështjellak* ‘apron’ which drops down from the leather sash, and the surmounted bodice, which consists of the *grykore* or *grykce* ‘upper body vest’, and the *jeleku* ‘jacket’. Figure 1 below is a display of the *xhubleta* on a flat canvas, and Figure 2 is a family portrait of the highland chieftain Prek Cali (early 20th century), from a region where the women all wear the traditional *xhubleta*.

The *xhubleta* has no analogue with any other type of new era costume in Southeastern Europe (Gjergji 2004: 155). The full bell-like skirt of the dress is reminiscent of the Cretan goddess’s lower garment (Coon 1950: 15-16; Belkaïd 2013). From the comparable dresses, the

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¹ For the skills, craftsmanship, and forms of usage of the *xhubleta* see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/xhubleta-skills-craftsmanship-and-forms-of-usage-01880>.

Bronze Cretan snake goddess figurines (dated to around 1600 BC) also have long “bell shaped” skirts (see Wace 1927/2014: 15-21).



Figure 1. Components of the *xhubleta*² Figure 2. Portrait of the family of Prek Cali³

A reconstructed Fresco from Tiryns (a Mycenaean archeological site in Argolis) dated later than the Cretan figurines, also bears a remarkable resemblance to the *xhubleta* (Figure 3). Gold rings from the acropolis treasure and the chamber tomb in Mycenae reveal figures of women wearing bell-shaped skirts (Wace 1927/2014: 23). An Illyrian terracotta figurine found in Kličevac dated to the Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC) also exhibits many of the features found on the *xhubleta*: horizontal lines running across the dress, the wide-leather sash, apron, and geometric and cosmic features (Figure 4). Garments with the lower bell-shaped part are also evident on monuments in southeastern Europe from the Roman period, worn by goddesses and female dancers (see Stipčević 1977: 90).

On the dress are many geometric, cosmic, floral, and religious symbols, including the sun, moon, and serpent (Gjokaj 2021: 81-2, vol. I) (see Figures 5 and 6).⁴ Many of the symbols are tied to the ethnography of northern Albania and to the southern Illyrian religious complex.⁵ The figurative symbols on the *xhubleta* are also thought to foster protection from evil spirits and diseases, most of all the *syni keq* ‘evil eye’ (Onuzi 2021: 27). Tumular graves in the Mat region of Albania containing Illyrian chains have been found to match those seen on the *xhubleta* of Malësia e Madhe (Gjergji 2004: 193).

² Retrieved from Instituti i Edukimit, Trashëgimisë dhe Turizmit (2025). <https://www.iett.al/the-thousand-year-old-xhubleta-the-queen-of-albanian-costumes/?lang=en>.

³ Retrieved from Shkoder.info (2007-2014). <https://www.shkoder.info/2018/01/10/nje-album-me-bukurite-e-kelmendit/>.

⁴ Stipčević (1977: 182-196) states that the Illyrians had a complex sun cult, and that Maximus of Tyre also mentions that the Paeones (who lived in present-day North Macedonia) also worshipped the sun.

⁵ The serpent cult is specifically tied to the southern Illyrian onomastic region (present-day northern Albania and Montenegro). The protecting snake or house serpent that is found on ornaments is frequently found in Albania and other southern Balkan states (see Doja 2004).



Figure 3. Reconstructed Fresco from Tiryns⁶



Figure 4. The Kličevac figurine⁷



Figure 5. Symbolism of the *xhubleta*⁸



Figure 6. Woman from Grudë, Albania⁹

⁶ Retrieved from Wace (1927/2014: 33).

⁷ For the Kličevac Bronze figurine see Childe (1925: 196-97) and Gjergji (2004: 182).

⁸ Retrieved from Shkoder.info (2007-2014). <https://www.shkoder.info/2018/01/10/nje-album-me-bukurite-e-kelemendit/>. Interestingly, two of the ornaments on the *xhubleta* are figures of hands (see Gjokaj 2021: 81-2, vol. I). Illyrian amulets have also been discovered in the shape of hands (see Stipčević 1977: 193).

⁹ Marubi photograph woman from Grudë.jpg (photograph by Pjetër Marubi (1834-1903), source Wikipedia Creative Commons). The British anthropologist Edith Durham (1909: 51) also describes the *xhubleta* as a black bell-shaped skirt. Furthermore, she states that the crescent moon symbol that the woman wear is not Turkish, but a common motif, as is the sun which is also found tattooed amongst the Albanian Christian tribes.

2. Etymology of *xhubleta*. The only etymology proposed suggests that *xhubletë* (indefinite form) was borrowed from Turkish *cüppe* ‘gown’, with the added suffixes *-lə* and *-etë* possibly from Italian (Topalli 2017: 1604-5). This does not describe how the Turkish *-pp-* gives Albanian *-b-*, and the additional suffixes *-lə* and *-etë* are not productive, nor do they make any contribution to the meaning. Moreover, there are no parallels for Turkish roots occurring in Albanian with Italian endings, rather only examples of loanwords replacing inherited Albanian forms, e.g. Albanian *jastek* ‘pillow’ from Turkish replacing Old Albanian *nënkrye* ‘id.’.

The arrival of the Ottomans in the Balkans and in Albania (15th-20th centuries) led to a clear decline in urban life after the 16th century, and a distinct social difference in clothing is evident between the rural and urban areas. Most items of the peasantry were produced in their own homes, and wool, essential for producing the *xhubleta*, was actually exported from northern Albania during 17th and 18th centuries to Venice, not imported. Folk costumes in many isolated zones retained distinctive regional features in the style of their cut (Gjergji 2004: 43-45). And up to the proclamation of Albanian independence in 1912, almost all of the rural areas continued to wear the folk costumes made at home according to traditional patterns (Gjergji 70). Considering the irregular phonological developments in Topalli’s etymology of *xhubleta* as a loan from Turkish, the need to posit problematic factors in the form of the word, and historical evidence for the preservation of the *xhubleta* in isolated regions of northern Albania, I propose a novel and methodically safe etymology, and discuss relevant social, cultural, and mythological ramifications.

2.1. ALBANIAN *XHUBLETA* < PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN **H₁SU-MELIT* ‘HAVING GOOD HONEY’.

In particular, I posit that *xhubleta* derives by regular sound change from the starting point in Proto Indo-European (PIE) — the source language for Albanian and related languages like Greek — of **h₁sú-melit* ‘having good honey’. This is an exocentric adjectival compound type found elsewhere in the language family. The first element is the PIE pre-verb/intensifying prefix **h₁su-* ‘good’, with reflexes in Greek *εὖ*, Sanskrit *su-*, and Hittite *aššu-*. The second element *bleta* is the Albanian word for ‘bee’ and derives from PIE **mélit* ‘honey’ (B. Demiraj 1997: 271) and is used as the basis for a noun meaning ‘bee’.

With regard to deriving the first element of the compound, namely Albanian *xhu-* /dʒu-/ < PIE **h₁su-* ‘good’, one must first consider that the regular reflex of PIE **s* before a stressed/accented vowel in Albanian (Alb.) is the voiced palatal stop <gj> /j/ (see 1).¹⁰

(1) PIE **sérpen-* ‘serpent’ > Alb. *gjarpër* ‘snake’ (Gheg Alb. *gjarpën*)

The form *xhubleta* however occurs with an initial voiced alveopalatal affricate /dʒ/ represented by the grapheme <xh>. In the Albanian-English Dictionary of Newmark (1998), there is an entry that cites the existence of *gjubletë* [jublet] with an initial voiced palatal stop [j] as a secondary form of the more commonly used *xhubletë* [dʒublet], showing the expected outcome. In the area of Kukës, in northeastern Albania, an early synonym taken from *xhubleta*

¹⁰ The regular outcome of PIE **s-* before a stressed vowel is Alb. *gj-* /j/. When **s-* does not occur before a stressed vowel, the regular reflex is *sh* [ʃ], e.g. PIE **srpini̯* (plural form of ‘snake’) > Alb. *shterpinj* ‘reptile’ (see Çabej 1962/2012: 91). In cases of dissimilation, the outcome of PIE **s* is Alb. *th* /θ/, e.g. PIE **suHs* ‘pig, swine’ > Alb. *thi* /θi/ ‘pig’ (de Vaan 2018: 1746). For a detailed development of PIE **s* in Albanian, see Schumacher and Matzinger (2013: 258-265).

Hock (2021: 115-16) calls this process “wrong timing epenthesis”, citing the development of an oral stop between a nasal stop and a [-nasal] consonant. This process is found in many languages including Greek (see Hock 2021: 115-16). The intrusive stop in Albanian *bleta* ‘bee’ can be accounted for through the same phonological development: **m(e)līt-ā* > **mlīt-ā* > **mblīta* > Modern Albanian *bleta* ‘bee’.

Thus, with both elements of the compound accounted for, the etymology of the traditional Albanian dress, the *xhubleta*, can be posited back to Proto-Albanian **jú-(m)blīt-ā* ‘bee’, originally from the PIE compound **h₁sú-melit* ‘having good honey’. The question that remains is why bees, and do bees have a cultural or mythological role in the etymology of the *xhubleta*.

3. Support for the new etymology. Alongside the linguistic evidence are other unique findings that tie the *xhubleta* to the Indo-European ‘honey’ root. Only a brief analysis is given here. For an in-depth investigation into the mythological and ethnographic nature of the *xhubleta* and its association to the new **h₁sú-melit* etymology, see Dedvukaj Forthcoming.

In Albanian there are two words for ‘die’, one for humans, *vdek*, and one for animals *ngordh* (dialectally *cof*). However, for bees, the human *vdek* is used, an index of their cultural importance (see Shkurtaj 2021: 130). From a cultural standpoint, it is significant that the ‘bee’ also has a special status in the Albanian law code, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, the customary law of northern Albania. In *Kanun* chapter 53, specific laws deal with possession, damage and theft of a beehive, the bee’s value, and ownership of bee swarms (see Joseph 2018: 21-23).

Finally, many scholars and anthropologists have noted the aesthetically similar appearance of the Cretan skirt with the *xhubleta*. The fact that my proposed etymology associates *xhubleta* with ‘bees’, and that the dress is similar to the Cretan skirt brings mythology into the mix, making Cretan ‘bee’ myths particularly relevant. Specifically, the oldest bee myth in Greek mythology of *Melissa* ‘the bee’ priestess who nourished the infant Zeus with honey on the isle of Crete.

4. Conclusion. A quite extraordinary fact is that the *xhubleta* has only survived in such a limited and historically isolated region of the northern Albanian highlands (Figure 7). Onuzi (2021: 17) states that the Albanian highlands and the *xhubleta* are synonymous, one cannot think of one without the other.



Figure 7. The *xhubletas* of the Kelmend area, early 20th century¹³

¹³ Retrieved from Onuzi (2021)

Albanian is the latest attested Indo-European language in the written record (15th century), which makes the reconstruction of its past more challenging than with other well-documented Indo-European languages. The importance of oral tradition and anthropological work in establishing ties with the past cannot be overstated. Important ethnographic and mythological work has been conducted by the Albanologist Robert Elsie. In Elsie (2001) and (2015), he presents Albanian myths regarding virtually every type of animal, including insects, but interestingly no bee myths. Of all the geometric, cosmic, floral, and zoological figures embroidered on the *xhubleta*, again, every type occurs except the bee.

Dedvukaj (forthcoming) explores the ethnography of Northern Albania in more detail and addresses the untold story of how a bee myth may have survived with the Albanian *xhubleta*, albeit lost in oral tradition. I seek to answer why the oldest traditional folk costume in the Balkans that can be posited as a derivative of Proto-Indo-European **h₁sú-melit* ‘having good honey’, has survived only in the northern Albanian highlands. Furthermore, what is the connection with Albanian *bleta* ‘bee’ and Greek *μέλισσα, μέλιττα* ‘bee’ (per Hyllested and Joseph 2022), and is the dress in any way tied to the Cretan myth of the priestess *Melissa* ‘the bee’ (Figure 8) who cured the infant Zeus with honey?



Figure 8. Bee-goddess (7th century BC)¹⁴

Thus, this network of associations involving bees, honey, Crete, the divine mythology of Zeus and Melissa, the Cretan goddess’s lower garment, the *xhubleta*, and the **h₁sú-melit* compound draws on all those elements and ties them together; that nexus is what makes the etymology compelling.

¹⁴ Plaque bee-goddess (User: Jastrow, 2016, Wikipedia Creative Commons).

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