

## Engagement Ceremony in the Sothorn Coastal Area of Albania, An Ethno-Folkloric View

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### Abstract

*One of the most important rituals in this area is also the engagement ceremony, which was considered like a prenuptial agreement of both young ones and it didn't have only a moral importance but also a juridical one between both families. But this tradition had to pass through some rules that each family had to follow starting from the matchmaker who was supposed to be a respected person to the gifts that was made according to the tradition. Also, in this tradition existed some strict rules where the consanguinity of the young ones, who were going to be engaged was forbidden. The engagement was allowed only if they were cousins after seven generations had passed. This rules was to avoid problems with the baby's health and also that the baby would be pure blood. Anyway the engagement could never be broken by the girls or the girl's family as I was considered to be a great offense to the boy and this could bring blood feud. The engagement ceremonial started from the day that the word was given and the setting date of the day. That rings were exchanged, that happened on Monday or Thursday, which was accompanied by giving gifts. But engagement can be broken from the family of the boy only for some reasons, if the girl was sick or deterioration of relations between the families up in enmity to property issues, if separate for moral issue then the family of the boy had to give explanations for claims that they had based on facts, otherwise that was a great insult to the girl's family amounting to enmity. A key step in this ritual is the moral and educational preparation for daughter as well for the men, and also the preparation of the girl for this holy day from the preparation and decoration of the girl from dyeing hair with henna and to the preparation of the dowry.*

**Keywords:** tradition, traditional wedding, rite, heritage, song, ritual practice

### Introduction

Engagement is an important moment in human life, whether it is the obligation of family and morality, even the laying of foundation stones for the fulfillment of the goals of early patriarchal to have heirs blood and wealth and the creation of new family. This is justified by a rich opus verses and rituals that accompany engagement, which have a practice rule that follow each - other and is one of the customary rituals that continues even today to be quite practiced. At the beginning of this long ritual, the two protagonists to be related to marriage get "chosen". According to custom, engagement is an important moment in human life, be it as a promise of marriage to moral character, but also as a legal agreement between the heads ( the householder 's son and the daughter's one ), that should be respected necessarily or it's deterioration in certain conditions lead to serious consequences, up to murder. Breaking the Engagement would mean a breach of faith, of the given word. The given word is the couple's premarital relationship, which shows that the boy and girl have decided to build their lives together.

Part of the ceremony of engagement are also the cycles of Folk Music, which relate to customs dealing with the binding of families through the ceremony of engagement, and gifts made on this occasion.

Social and family life was regulated by law, therefore cutting the given word for engagement and exchange of moles were a public commitment and people considered equivalent to the legal and unbreakable connection that was created between the couple.

Families have paid careful review of the circumstances before wedlock and have given it great ceremonialism, to express the joy, happiness and appreciation for this step in the life of the two young ones.

Care and preparation for engagement was not only during certain days but started years ago by the way of educating the children. When children grew up, parents were at the forefront concerns about the fate of their lives and trying to prepare them well to face the future.

The son was better taken care of, because he had to become a good man, to keep a family on his shoulders, to be responsible to face life and also meet all obligations required of him outside the house. Different from boys, girls got prepared to become good wives, mothers able to raise and educate children, and very good housewives.

All this preparation was because the creation of new families was at the forefront of the parents, not only when it came time for the wedding, but also later. Serious preparations were made for the young ones to be acquainted and to remove any shyness for a big step such as marriage, which would be soon to come.

Each engagement began with the messenger who was a mediator for the betrothal. He was a man who knew both families and felt that they could link the fate of their children, because in general they made a good match for marriage. To them he was supposed to be a man of his word, known for fearlessness and honesty. After his task was done, his gift was a pair of shoes by the bridegroom, such a gift was more of a symbolic character to reward efforts of round - trip on both sides, until the engagement was made. During the wedding, the bride always brought a gift of a towel and a handkerchief that was also symbolic for the trouble of the messenger.

Despite the general nature in Albania three types of matchmakers are known: interest-free, financial interest, or both together. On the coast, matchmaking was not made out of financial interest because there was a belief that matchmaking was a necessity, as it were the only way of binding between families.

An engagement without a messenger was made only when the girl was forcibly taken from her parents' house, or she left herself and got married, which was an extraordinary event and unacceptable for the family and the social circle in which the girl lived. But these engagements can be made even when the families of the boy and the girl knew each other well or when the friendship could be renewed as when the arrangements were previously completed

In these kind of family bindings, a matchmaker was not necessary, because now both respective families were in continuous contact, were very well acquainted and did not need further information to decide ties by marriage.

Objective and subjective reasons that determined the need for matchmaking of engagements have been different, but the main and most crucial cause has been the prohibition of engagements within the tribe i.e. between girls and boys with blood relations. This obstacle existed in order to preserve the purity of the tribe and for healthy descendants to be born.

The task of the messenger usually was assigned to a man who had authority or had friendship or binding with the girl's family, a man of his word and not just anyone. Messenger could also be a woman, with the knowledge and permission of her husband. Her actions were preliminary, as the final act of engagement was completed by her husband, for the word of the man was a guarantee of respecting the agreement. When the landlord decided on matchmaking, he paid a visit to the other family and show the reason for coming. His job was to put the first stone in the foundation of creating a new family, therefore from him "depended" the future of the two respective families related in friendship.

Once the deal between the interested parties was made, they appointed a day Monday or Thursday, to drink the coffee of engagement. Which was the main ritual ceremony.

The demand for betrothal was always made by the boy. This action had to do with preserving the image of the girl, to whom belong the right to choose even though her personal opinion was not taken into account at all.

In both Muslims and Orthodox beliefs the betrothal was made by matchmaking. The presence of two witnesses is part of the ritual practice of placing the crown. Families held feasts, according to their economies. On the day the word was given, a date was appointed for the engagement coffee. They got some gifts with them. The only difference of the engagement between the two religions was the fact that the Orthodox permitted a request for engagement from the girl's family, while the Muslims did not. If such a thing was to happen that put into question the character and integrity of the girl.

In the late XIX and especially in the early XX century among Orthodox families, customs changed, being influenced by European behavior, much faster than Muslims. The main factor of these impacts was mainly the young people from wealthy Orthodox families going out of the country to attend schools. Their arrival was accompanied by the arrival of new elements, which aimed at liberation of the closed family life in Albania. The elderly claim that in previous times there were less differences between their marriage ceremonies, which indicates early common culture. In the late nineteenth century and early XX century and even later they began to deepen some changes. We can say that national traditional customs were being replaced with a blend of our tradition with European or Oriental elements but again the tradition of engagement is very important.

As mentioned earlier engagement in civic families, was actually carried out by parents, the girl was requested a formal opinion, or simply informed of the engagement. These kinds of connections, initiative and decision of the parents, made them carry a great responsibility for the further progress of the life of their children. In general, the engagement is respected

as "institution of the oldest" which meant the oldest children. To be engaged prior to the release queue was unlikely, children betrothed in order. Interviews show that this queue was sometimes unaffected by gender. However these were isolated cases, as the queue is usually respected only among girls. Also in certain areas it is a custom for the younger sister to get married before her brother. It happened not infrequently that any physical deformation of the oldest girl delayed the engagements of her younger sisters, until her partner was found as well.

Ethnographic elements and aspects of the application of the rituals described above were mentioned in the songs sung during the ceremony.

These were creations that intended to create the festive atmosphere in this step with great weight in human life. Songs were dedicated to the promises, of engagement. The main attention focuses on the figure of the girl who would become a bride. In this cycle until the end of the ceremony, the girl will remain the main character of the wedding ceremony.

Several symbolic objects such as clothing, jewelry, different gifts mentioned in the songs help us recognize the ritual of engagement. But the lyrics, as noted above, pay more attention to the birth and flowering of affection, claiming that, even when love was forced to enter the tight frame, people understood that the marriage bond, has mutual feelings as a foundation.

On the social plain, the engagement of young creates cheerful atmosphere. Everybody looks at them with kindness. The whole ceremony was permeated by congratulations regarding luck, happiness, friendship, etc. They all spoke of the main purpose of the ceremony, creating a new family that would be healthy and inseparable for the rest of their lives.

Engagement is the prelude to the marriage contract, which means: the proposal the boy makes to the girl for marriage. Usually the proposal made by the boy who then becomes the fiancé (the one who proposes) after the act of engagement, while the woman is betrothed (proposed).

So, engagements aimed and revealed the position of the girl and her family, because the consent of the two families was necessary before the contract of marriage was made

The ritual of the first meeting of the two families is also quite special. The boy's family goes and speaks to the landowner, the girl's father, or if is not present, his oldest son is summoned by name, as he is now the host. Usually the wife opens the door. She invites them to join in and with the accession of them walking in, the family members who are in the house in that moment get on their feet. Friends are directed by the lady of the house near the chimney. When a guest is present the fire has to be well lit, because, even if the house does not have food, liquor or other things to offer them, the latter is satisfied with the fire of the chimney and the smiling courtesy of the mistress of the house, the "*veqile*"<sup>1</sup>, as it was called at that time for such cases.

She brings coffee and hard liquor and the host addresses the guest, claiming he did not know the reason of the visit. "Speak, o traveler! What good brought you to me?" The first representative of the boy's family replies: "Trouble brought me here." The landlord asks: "What trouble?" It is interesting to note here that the demand was not direct, but expressed with metaphors. "Would it do for our fireplaces to make for a third fire?" And then transformed to a direct request. "I come to ask the girl's hand for the boy." Another interesting fact is that in the coastal culture it wasn't the boy's family who asked for the girl's hand.

As the claim is stated, the girl's father says to his wife: "Woman, bring the bottle of liquor before us!" This was the first sign that the demand was preferable.

The owner of the house itself fills the guest's glass, takes his and says: "Arise, cheers, my friend! Welcome!" This is the second sign that the guest is waiting for. The conversation continues while the men drank the liquor. The host then addresses the guest: "Listen, friend. Your demand honors me, but I need to take my time for a response, as I am to discuss this matter with my neighborhood." The neighborhood meant the family and the key members of the girl's tribe, which meant men.

Unlike today, the future of children in past centuries was decided not only by the close family but also the rest of the relatives. The boy's family answers: "Of course you will have to discuss, but do not take long." Here's where hope first

blossoms. In case of a negative response, which was never given at the moment, but the next morning the girl would've been promised to another family. For that all measures had been taken. Such was the honor, dignity and pride of Himara.

The landlord does not rush to give a response. That's because of several reasons: firstly, it was against his pride to openly show excitement, secondly, because the householder needs time to get information on the boy's family, his social circles and distant relatives. Normally this should be the time to research any distant blood ties, debts, old enmities, etc. The family's friends were also checked for enemies, as they could engage their daughter to an enemies' friend.

Other information can be, for example, the reputation of the boy's family. As well as its economic position and social status. This is applied throughout Albania. In addition to information on economic and social position, the girl's father can also ask for the boy's mother's ancestry. This not only to avoid any possible blood ties, but also to see family roots from the mother's side, from what family his mother was, as it was believed that the children that would be born will definitely take after their grandmother's brothers.

Where there was harmony and demands and conditions were met, the response was usually not delayed. The answer was generally given within three months. There were cases when the response was given after a week or 15 days or a month, but usually within three months. When there was turmoil, resentment, unrest or match of blood, when the love between the couple was spread throughout the opinion of the village, the province and known by all neighborhoods and tribes of the village, then the answer may be delayed a year, and in some cases it was delayed up to three years depending on the final settlement of enmities that can exist between two tribes.

Conditions could be placed and factors taken into so that possible hostilities could be quenched for the sake of the couple's love. We can say that it happened among the wiser people, to those tribes with rich traditions and cultural heritage, bravery, which were heard and respected in the province or in the countryside. They argued the issue in the Assembly and the whole family and the neighborhood had a say in the matter as they were also included in the feud.

After the expiration of the waiting period, the visit was repeated by a member of the family of the boy, usually the one who had made the first visit. "Come on in!" The guest sat in the corner, was offered coffee and liquor by the lady of the house, and having knocked their glasses together, the host hands the box or pouch of tobacco with flint and tinder to the guest. The lighting of the cigarette, indicated that the promise was made. The host lit the guest's cigarette, then the two parents, uncles, or brothers rise up on their feet and hugged. The embrace was the symbol of the end of the first phase.

The day of the engagement was not decided at the moment, because of possible economic difficulties of the families, woes of the tribe, who could be located away from each other, where most were shepherds, farmers, also in the southern a lot of people left as immigrants. However, after obtaining consent, in the near future engagement was made through the exchange of visits and dinners between both families. Usually these exchanges were made on Sundays, one after another. A few weeks later families determined the day of the wedding, which could not be changed.

The wedding date must be an odd number. This can be changed only in case of death, which ought to be grave enough to make the change of date obligatory. The death of a child or an elderly man, were not considered as such, but only the death of a young man of 18-25. In such cases, the mourning family would inform the other on the period of grieving. This period's end was signaled when the grieving family started singing as it was the first sign in people's psychology which ensured the happiness of the marriage.

After the date of the engagement was set, began the visits between the couple's relatives, except for the couple itself. Various pretexts were used, such as randomly dropping by, request for help, or borrowing cattle. The day of the engagement the boy's family came to the bride's side. In this visit, all members of the family of the house of the girl were forced to wait outside the gate. Group hosts were composed by leading men of the family and tribe, and two or three married women who were older than the bride.

First came the girl's father. He was at the forefront. However, if the girl's family had a grandfather or grandmother they were at the forefront too, but the main leader was the father. To be noted here is a phenomenon that occurs among Muslims as well as Christians. "Blood-brother" was a close friend of the bridegroom, with whom he's performed the blood-bounding ritual. He had the same respect as the godfather. The families met, greeted each other, shook hands, hugged, and then entered the guest room to sit on the woolen carpet.

Betrothal had some obstacles. Engagement is not allowed between people who were of a tribe, as they were considered siblings. If they were related to the father's side of the family any marriages between the tribes were impossible for seven generations, while connections to the mother's side limited it to five.

Despite its unbreakable character, the engagement was off only when one of the betrothed died, which brought no other matter to handle other than wealth redistribution. The engagement could be called off only by the man's family as they had the exclusive right over its status (with the consent of the father). Causes of breaking the engagement could be: the girl's illness, deterioration of relations between families' fiancés to hostilities but also because of real estate issues.

When the honor of the girl's family was in question, they had to provide explanations to prove their claims, otherwise offense would be taken and hostility would be conceived, which would also lead up to murder.

The girl's family had no right to break the engagement, as it was considered a grave insult and could only be made up by the killing of family members including the girl.

The girl did not have a say on who she was engaged to.

### **The qualities of the betrothed**

As the young man and women begin to mature, they start thinking about the qualities of their life partners, who will one day become their husband or wife.

For a strong and solid relationship it was important for each of them to be in the same social status.

Not that association with a member of a higher social status wasn't an ambition, however such relationships were less stable than those of a same level. In one way or another the difference between the social levels would affect the relationship. Expenses were also a problem of their own. For example, in villages cattle would need to be sold in order to face the wedding expenses, and such a thing could ruin the family's economy, in cases when the other party were of a higher economic level, and had higher requirements than the other family can afford. It was the boy's family who had to cover most of the expenses.

There were other conditions besides economic. These could be cultural or educational, and some of them had physical preferences, such as height and eye color. Some property condition, and others as a condition of receiving background and good family. Family background was important as well. Another very important quality were beliefs and religion.

Religious women were considered to be of a higher morality and human virtues.

Such qualities were the minimal requirements for a bride, and aforementioned traits are a plus in her favor. On the contrary, when a woman is wealthy, beautiful, or comes from a renowned family and has none of the religious morals she has no benefits and is considered prone to infidelity, dishonesty and headstrongness.

The qualities mentioned, also apply to men and a female should not allow herself to marry a man because of his wealth, position or beauty, but she should require that, first of all, the man to be moral as it's the key to a happy marriage.

The man who is virtuous, well educated in terms of national and religious identity, and with a strong character, protects his wife, lives in harmony with her and is patient and caring towards her. If he loves her, he respects her; if there is dislike between the couple the man can let go of the women in a civilized manner.

Cohabitation is overwhelmed with responsibility. During this time it is likely for many things to change. If it is built on weak grounds, e.g. based on the property, and if all the wealth is spent, large cracks will doubtlessly occur in marital relationships, because a marriage not been built on sound foundations, but on the basis of a transitional greed, is doomed to an end.

Only a marriage that is built on sound foundations, is a real marriage.

Based on the principles and rules referred to above, which lead to a healthy and stable marriage, we also hope for Albanians as a people to continue to respect family values and morals.

In the past (previous generations), and nowadays as well, engagement in our current society is built on the basis of different interests that satisfy the needs and conditions that partners have set for each other as necessities of a possible marriage

in the future. Aforementioned qualities were once deemed necessary to develop a solid foundation for engagement, but nowadays these qualities and requirements are totally different and we can say with complete assurance that they are wrong. This has also caused more frequent divorces amongst young couples.

While in our immediate past engagements were made (as our ancestors inform us) based on interests and weak motives which lead to an unhappy marital life. Organizing the betrothal was the parents' exclusive right, the girl's opinion never being accounted. The same is often true for young men who didn't get to decide on their own fiancée, but he was rather forced into a betrothal, right after his sisters were "taken care of" as well, which negatively affect both women and men.

So, these engagements were made on weak grounds, e.g. based on assets, social status and even scandalous examples such as the "daughter swapping"; a girl is offered to the boy's family to marry in exchange for one of his sisters and vice versa, all because of vile interests.

Therefore, the engagement does not lead to the creation of a happy family. Often these engagements end tragically, such as the suicide of one of the fiancés. The most frequent victims have been women, but cases where the victims were men are not absent.

Also, these links have even led to the destruction of families, ruining of marriages and infidelities and abandonment, especially men who decide to secretly marry another woman (usually in a different country), leaving their lawful wife and kids behind. Women are also not excluded from such behavior. These cases are quite frequent, and that is mostly because of the phenomena of "mismatching", the main obstacle for divorce being the fear of the general public opinion.

In this day and age, while we are so proud of our new Albanian society and it's civilized morals and values, there are fixed engagements still being set up, with little differences from the time when they were the norm and overall, they're still wrong. It is still the boy's family that takes the initiative, carefully selecting the family they want to create matrimonial connections with, while also reviewing the mother's side of the family. The man of the house had absolute power, while the girls were fully submissive to whatever fate he had planned out for them, their free will fully ignored.

In the past marital connections were made between certain social strata. A peasant son could only hope to marry into another peasant's family, while a merchant wouldn't expect his son to marry anything less than another merchant's daughter. This way, a stable household was maintained. There's a saying in Himara that says: "Should you want to wed a maid, ask her mother as well". The mothers were considered as a reflection of the girl's morality. She was also seen as an example regarding household chores, raising children and maintaining good relationships between families as well.

Engagements were made within the same religion. As marriages of the same faith they express the fanaticism and bigotry of that time, keeping love and marriage within an "impenetrable framework". But there were times when love has violated these collective norms and young lovers have realized their marriage by fleeing elsewhere. These marriages have been rare and generally detested by both the families of the young lovers. Many times they have ended tragically, with division, strife, return to the family, even murder. Gradually, this mentality began to fade. New thoughts began to become part of the concept of marriage between different religions, prejudices started to fall regarding marriage taking place between young people with different religions, etc.

Today engagement is made with the consent of the young (boy and girl), which leads to think that young people have now been liberated from the habits and interests with weak motives based on tradition of the past, when engagements were arranged by the parents, not considering their children's will. But today, engagements, although happening with the consent of the young, is still not built based on the qualities and features mentioned above, as most of engagements occur mainly based on the economic situation of the partner without expecting any redeeming qualities from the partner. And it's a criteria on which most parents usually agree on.

Today engagements are arranged on criteria such as physical appearance and wealth. In comparison, origin, family, ethnicity and religion are barely regarded, so long as the selected partner is loving, wealthy and good looking.