



Culture, Identity, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Society: Tradition as a Living Social Practice

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Abstract

This article examines early twentieth-century European travelogues as living archives of cultural heritage with implications for intercultural education and indigenous knowledge systems. Focusing on Northern Albania, the study reconceptualizes travel literature by Erich Liebert, Karl Steinmetz, William Le Queux, and Paul Siebertz as ethnographic sources documenting practices of social order, identity formation, and cultural continuity. Through qualitative interpretive methodology anchored in cultural anthropology and critical heritage studies, the analysis demonstrates how foreign observers documented hospitality, dwelling practices, landscape relations, and moral codes as living heritage transmitted through embodied experience. The research contributes to heritage studies by theorizing these narratives as intercultural mediation, providing pedagogical resources for intercultural education and interpretive cultural tourism. In contemporary society, where cultural identities are negotiated between globalizing forces and local resistance, the indigenous knowledge systems documented offer alternative models for social cohesion, intercultural ethics, and sustainable community practices. These narratives offer a model for social pedagogy promoting empathy and intercultural cooperation.

Keywords: living heritage, cultural resilience, intercultural education, indigenous knowledge systems, social pedagogy, globalization, identity formation, heritage preservation.

1. Introduction

Current studies on cultural heritage have undergone a profound paradigm shift, leaving behind essentialist approaches focused on physical objects and treating

heritage as a developing social construction (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). This theoretical evolution has changed the approach of academics, practitioners, and communities to its interpretation and transmission. While traditional models primarily valued architectural monuments, museum collections, and artifacts as bearers of cultural identity, the modern paradigm emphasizes the crucial role of everyday practices, lived experiences, and collective knowledge in shaping cultural identity and continuity.

In this developed theoretical framework, heritage is no longer a static collection of historical relics, but a living network of meaning that is constructed, transmitted, and refreshed through social connections, daily rituals, and generational inheritance. This shift has major implications for the study, documentation, and protection of heritage, especially in contexts where formal recording institutions have been rare or insufficient. In contemporary Europe, where cultural identities are negotiated between globalization and local resistance, understanding the historical processes of identity and the transmission of local knowledge becomes essential for educational policy.

Travel literature plays a key role in this academic debate, providing unique evidence of social life and community organization in historical eras characterized by few or fragmented local documents. For peripheral European areas such as the Balkans and especially Northern Albania, European travelogues of the 19th and early 20th centuries create a valuable archive of social life, cultural organization, and everyday practices, rare in other sources. Northern Albania at the turn of the 20th century represents a typical case where traditions prevailed over the modern state. The country relied on the Kanun, an unwritten code that regulated marriage, property, and justice; a tribal organization that strengthened collective identity; and mountainous terrain that favored isolation and autonomy. These circumstances fostered oral tradition, family rituals, and embodied practices as the primary means of cultural preservation. Without formal schools or official documents, heritage was preserved through daily performances, observation, participation in rituals, and family socialization, creating a “living” heritage based on practice, not static objects.

Early twentieth-century travel accounts by Karl Steinmetz (“Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbanien,” (1904), Erich Liebert “Aus dem Nordalbanischen Hochgebirge,” (1909), William Le Queux “An Observer in the Near East”, (1907), and Paul Siebertz “Albanien und die Albanesen,” (1910) offer extensive ethnographic evidence regarding landscape characteristics, domestic architecture, sartorial traditions, hospitality protocols, foodways, and ethical frameworks. These works, produced immediately prior to Albanian state formation (1912) and Ottoman imperial dissolution, capture a critical transitional period in Albanian cultural history.

This article treats these historical texts as narrative archives of living heritage, systematically analyzing how their documented cultural practices supported social order, collective security, community identity, and the effective transmission of

indigenous knowledge in conditions characterized by geographic isolation, ongoing political tensions, and the virtual absence of modern state institutions. For contemporary intercultural education and social pedagogy, these historical examples offer valuable models for understanding cultural diversity. In the era of globalization, migration, and intensifying identity debates throughout Europe, these indigenous knowledge systems take on renewed significance and practical relevance: the Besa institution offers a compelling ethic of unconditional hospitality and collective responsibility; transhumance practices demonstrate sophisticated models of sustainable management; tribal structures exemplify solidarity and mutual support beyond state authority.

1.2 Research Questions

This study addresses three interrelated research questions that guide the analysis and structure the interpretation of the findings:

How do early twentieth-century European travel writings document tangible and intangible cultural practices as living heritage in Northern Albania, and what methodological challenges arise in using these sources as ethnographic evidence?

What specific roles do indigenous knowledge systems play in maintaining social order, facilitating identity formation, and ensuring cultural continuity in the absence of modern state institutions, and how do these systems compare with contemporary organizational models?

How can historical travel narratives effectively serve as pedagogical resources for intercultural education, teacher training, and interpretive cultural tourism development, and what policy frameworks are needed to support such applications?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Heritage as a Social Construction and Cultural Discourse

The academic study of cultural heritage has undergone profound theoretical and methodological transformations over the past decades, shifting the focus from positivist approaches oriented towards physical objects and monuments to constructivist perspectives that treat heritage as a social process and cultural discourse. Laurajne Smith (2006), in her seminal work "Uses of Heritage," argues that heritage is not an objective entity independent of context, but a discursive process through which societies create and negotiate meanings about their past. She identifies the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" as a complex of institutionalized norms and practices that privilege monumentalism, professional expertise, and national narratives, often marginalizing alternative forms of heritage and community voices.

This critique of the dominant discourse has opened pathways toward more inclusive and democratic approaches, recognizing heritage as a participatory process in which communities play an active role in its identification, interpretation, and transmission. Smith (2006) emphasizes that the process of "heritage-making" is deeply political,

reflecting and reproducing power relations, social hierarchies, and particular economic and political interests.

This perspective has profoundly influenced heritage studies, encouraging scholars to examine not only “what” is inherited, but also “how” it is inherited, “from whose perspective” and “for what interests”. Rodney Harrison (2013) extends this critical analysis by arguing that heritage is rooted in everyday experiences, interpersonal relationships, and social performances, making it an active force in shaping contemporary identities and aspirations for the future.

In “Heritage: Critical Approaches”, Harrison (2013) proposes a model of heritage as an “assemblage” that links objects, practices, places, people, discourses, and institutions in complex networks of meaning. This approach, based on Actor-Network Theory, conceptualizes heritage as an interconnected process where tangible and intangible, human and non-human elements interact to produce cultural meaning and value. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) has played a crucial role in the formalization and international legitimization of this turn towards treating heritage as a living process.

The Convention defines intangible heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, together with the associated instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces, which communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The importance of this definition lies in the recognition that intangible heritage is transmitted across generations, constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment, interactions with nature and history, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity.

2.2 The Concept of Living Heritage

Within this broader theoretical framework, the concept of “living heritage” has gained particular importance as an analytical category that emphasizes the dynamic and performative dimension of cultural transmission. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004), in her article “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” argues that living heritage highlights cultural practices as ongoing processes of performance and renewal, not as static objects of preservation. She characterizes intangible heritage as “metacultural, since it not only represents culture, but it is also produced through processes of cultural self-reflection and self-representation.

This concept is particularly relevant to contexts such as early 20th-century Northern Albania, where formal institutional mechanisms for preservation and documentation were absent or largely limited. Without museums, state archives, formal educational institutions, or written systems of documentation, cultural heritage was preserved primarily through daily practice, oral transmission, family and community observation, and direct experience in rituals and collective activities.

This form of heritage, based on ongoing practice, social performance, and embodied transmission, is fully consistent with what theorists call living heritage. Jan Assmann (1995), in his studies on cultural memory, distinguishes between “communicative memory, transmitted through daily contacts extending over three or four generations, and cultural memory, codified in symbolic and institutional forms that transcend human life. Living heritage, as reflected in the itineraries of Northern Albania, operates mainly in the field of communicative memory, but gradually passes into cultural memory through rituals, narratives, and practices that codify collective identity generation after generation.

2.3 Cultural Practices, Symbolic Capital, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

From an anthropological perspective, cultural practices go beyond the role of inherited customs or decorative rituals. Pierre Bourdieu (1977), in “Outline of a Theory of Practice,” develops an advanced theory of practice, conceptualizing it as the product of “habitus,” stable systems of embodied dispositions that generate and organize practices and representations. Habitus is created by previous experiences and socialization, but it self-produces new practices that are structured and structuring: they reproduce existing social structures while allowing for variation and adaptation.

The concept of “symbolic capital” is particularly useful for the analysis of practices such as hospitality in the Albanian context. Symbolic capital arises when economic, social, and cultural capital is perceived as legitimate. In societies with a limited monetary economy and weak state institutions, symbolic capital, through honor, reputation, loyalty, and reciprocal obligations, serves as a key mechanism for social organization and the maintenance of order. Hospitality acts as a symbolic investment: generosity towards the guest is converted into reputation, honor, and reciprocal ties, strengthening the social position of the host and solidarity in wider networks.

Michael Herzfeld (2005), in “Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State,” offers another framework for practices in peripheral and postcolonial contexts. He describes “cultural intimacy” as aspects of collective identity known among members but unsuitable for public display to outsiders, especially hegemonic states or colonial agents. This concept clarifies the dynamics between European travelers and Albanian communities: what they documented were not simply “objective realities,” but mediated performances, strategic presentations, and negotiations shaped by Ottoman domination, European marginalization, and Orientalist stereotypes. Regarding indigenous knowledge systems, contemporary literature has moved from an essentialist view of “primitive traditions” to their recognition as sophisticated, adaptive, and dynamic epistemologies.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in “Decolonizing Methodologies,” insists that these systems should be understood in their own terms, not as “underdeveloped” forms of modern knowledge, but as alternative logics with intrinsic values and methodologies. In Albania, the Kanun, with its detailed rules on property, marriage, justice, and social

organization, embodies a legal and social epistemology adapted to specific ecological, economic, and political conditions.

2.4 Travel Literature as an Ethnographic Source and Form of Cultural Representation

Travel literature has been widely analyzed, especially after Edward Said's (1978) "Orientalism," which shows how Western writers presented the East as an exotic and weak place, ready to be ruled by Europe. This criticism makes us read these texts carefully today, finding racial prejudices and colonial ideas. Mary Louise Pratt (1992), in "Imperial Eyes," explains that travel texts create "contact zones," places where different cultures meet on unequal terms.

Travelers dominated, but locals influenced by adapting or resisting, creating complex negotiations, not just domination. James Clifford (1988), in "The Predicament of Culture," argues that every traveler writes from his or her own cultural, class, and personal position, but a signaled reading can extract value from these texts by examining the author's own limitations.

As an ethnographic source, travel writing captures lived cultural encounters and rituals often inaccessible through formal anthropology, serving as raw data for reconstructing historical worldviews in regions like the Balkans. Simultaneously, it functions as a form of cultural representation by employing narrative tropes, such as the romantic gaze or ethnographic detail, to construct identities, inviting critical analysis of how these texts both document and distort intangible heritage for modern sustainable tourism narratives.

2.5 The Gap in the Literature and the Contribution of the Study

Although the literature on cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and travelogues is abundant, an integrated analysis of these fields in the Balkan and Albanian context is lacking. Studies on living heritage mainly focus on Asia, Africa, or Latin America, leaving the Balkans outside these theoretical frameworks. Meanwhile, analyses of Balkan travelogues mainly treat literary or orientalist aspects, but not as sources for current cultural practices or indigenous knowledge systems.

This study closes this gap by:

- Applying the theory of living heritage to the Balkans;
- Treating travelogues as ethnographic archives of cultural practices;
- Linking historical analysis with contemporary applications in intercultural education and cultural tourism;
- Showing how indigenous historical knowledge offers models for current societal challenges.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Approach

This study is implemented with a qualitative interpretive methodology, based on cultural hermeneutics and historical ethnography. Travel texts are not seen as transparent windows into historical reality, but as mediated representations, shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. The methodology balances two main goals:

- Extracting valuable ethnographic data on the cultural practices of Northern Albania;
- Critically analyzing the way these practices were represented, interpreted, and mediated by European authors.

As Albanian researchers working in the fields of heritage studies and comparative literature, we contribute with a dual positionality to this study. On the one hand, our insider knowledge of the Albanian cultural context enables us to capture linguistic nuances, social codes, and embodied practices that may remain opaque to external observers. On the other hand, our academic distance allows for critical interpretation grounded in contemporary theoretical frameworks. This insider-outsider positioning proves methodologically advantageous for analyzing travel texts that themselves emerged from intercultural contact zones.

3.2 Primary Source Corpus

The primary corpus includes four main travelogues published between 1904 and 1910:

Karl Steinmetz was an Austro-Hungarian engineer, explorer, and travel writer, known for his travels in the mountains of northern Albania, first in 1903-1904 and later on other expeditions. He traveled extensively in the mountainous territory of northern Albania, described the settlements and rural areas in detail, and published three volumes in German with descriptions of the terrain and the people he met, including “Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Nordalbanien” (1904) and further editions in 1905 and 1908. Steinmetz also took time to learn the Albanian language and wrote linguistic materials such as a grammar and dictionary of the northern dialect.

William Le Queux (1907): “An Observer in the Near East”. British journalist and spy novelist combines ethnographic observation with dramatic narratives. He describes urban life in Shkodër, intercommunal tensions, and Albanian hospitality in a popular sensationalist style.

Erich Liebert (1909): “Aus dem Nordalbanischen Hochgebirge”. An Austrian physician who documents the Alpine landscape, flora, fauna, and cultural practices. Shows cross-cultural sensitivity, interpreting customs in their social-ecological context without ethnocentric judgments.

Paul Siebertz, German journalist and author, wrote: “Albanien und die Albanese” (1910), a book containing narrative descriptions of Albanian life, landscapes, and society, often accompanied by photographs and illustrations. His work is particularly important for the visual and ethnographic documentation of the early 20th century in the Northern Highlands.

The selection of these four texts was based on several criteria:

- geographical coverage of Northern Albania;
- time period, all published within a decade, documenting culture at a specific historical moment;
- diversity of national origin (German, Austrian, British) and methodological orientations (scientific, journalistic, artistic);
- access to original texts in German and English.

3.3. Analytical Process

The analysis consists of four interrelated phases that include repeated reading, thematic coding, anthropological interpretation, and comparative analysis:

Phase 1: Initial Reading and Thematic Mapping

This is a thorough reading of all four texts to gain a general understanding of content, narrative structure, and tone. During this initial reading, key themes that recurred across multiple texts were identified: landscape and spatial organization; residential architecture; clothing and material culture; hospitality and food practices; honor codes and justice systems; clan and tribal organization; and life-transition rituals (birth, marriage, death).

Phase 2: Systematic Coding and Extraction of Passages

In the second phase, each text was reread systematically, extracting all passages that described specific cultural practices. These passages were coded according to thematic categories and organized into an analytical database that allowed for systematic comparison across texts. For each cultural practice (hospitality), all references were identified across the four texts, allowing for analysis of consistency, variation, and elaboration of detail.

Phase 3: Anthropological Interpretation and Theoretical Contextualization

The documented practices were analyzed through the lens of anthropological theories and heritage studies. The key questions that guided this phase were:

- What social function did this practice serve?
- How did it contribute to the maintenance of social order, community solidarity, and the transmission of identity?
- How did it relate to the specific ecological, economic, and political conditions of the region?

- How can this practice be interpreted in terms of contemporary theories of symbolic capital, habitus, cultural intimacy, and living heritage?

Phase 4: Comparative Discursive Analysis

The final phase involved the systematic comparison of how different authors represented and interpreted similar cultural phenomena. This analysis revealed considerable variation in representational strategies, discursive registers, evaluative judgments, and the degree of ethnographic detail. Comparative analysis enabled the identification of common patterns that transcended the individual positionalities of the authors, suggesting aspects of cultural practices that were sufficiently visible and consistent to be noted by multiple observers.

4. Results

4.1 Material Culture and Dwelling Practices as Living Heritage

Travelers devoted substantial attention to the material culture of Northern Albania, particularly architectural forms associated with social organization and environmental adaptation. Steinmetz (1904) offers detailed descriptions of the distinctive stone towers (kulla) that dominated the highland landscape, interpreting them not merely as defensive structures but as complex material embodiments of clan identity, social hierarchy, and intergenerational family continuity. Liebert (1909) situates dwelling practices within broader ecological and economic frameworks, documenting how architectural forms responded astutely to the vertical ecology of the mountains through seasonal migration between altitudinal zones.

Le Queux (1907) emphasizes the social dimensions of dwelling spaces, describing the oda (guest room) as a meticulously constructed space dedicated exclusively to receiving visitors. Siebertz (1910) documents the collective nature of architectural production, revealing how major construction projects mobilized extended family networks and reciprocal labor obligations. These converging observations establish dwelling practices as a form of living heritage that integrates material necessity, aesthetic expression, social organization, and symbolic meaning. This living heritage remains discernible today in Northern Albania's rural landscapes, offering considerable potential for sustainable tourism narratives that promote cultural authenticity without excessive commercialization.

These travel texts document both tangible heritage (towers, odas) and intangible heritage (hospitality code, clan reciprocity), yet challenge our insider-outsider methodology through the travelers' Eurocentric biases and lack of local contextualization. The kulla and odas underscore the central role of indigenous knowledge systems in maintaining social order, facilitating identity formation, and ensuring cultural continuity in the absence of modern state institutions, distinguishing them from contemporary individualistic models.

As pedagogical resources, these narratives serve intercultural education, tourist guide training, and interpretive cultural tourism development, necessitating national policies that integrate ethnographic heritage into sustainable tourism curricula.

4.2. Hospitality (Besa) as Ethical Framework and Social Institution

The most extensively documented practice is besa, variously translated as hospitality, honor, trust, or sacred obligation. Steinmetz (1904) interprets besa primarily through the prism of personal honor and reputation, documenting instances where hosts provided protection irrespective of personal cost, characterizing it as the central pillar of individual morality. Liebert (1909) offers a nuanced analysis by situating besa within broader systems of reciprocity and social cohesion, revealing how hospitality exchanges constructed social capital in contexts where formal institutions were limited or absent.

Le Queux (1907) emphasizes its spiritual dimensions, noting that hospitality obligations were invoked in God's name and deemed religiously binding, thereby conferring a sacral force that transcended secular contracts. Siebertz (1910) documents its pedagogical transmission, describing how children learned hospitality through direct observation and active participation in family rituals. Synthesizing these accounts, "besa" emerges as a sophisticated ethical framework performing multiple simultaneous functions: providing security for foreign travelers, establishing enduring social networks, equitably distributing resources, reinforcing family honor, and transmitting foundational cultural values across generations, thereby serving as a universal regulatory mechanism of social life.

These travel descriptions document besa as living intangible heritage that governs social and ethical practices, yet challenge our insider-outsider methodology through Eurocentric interpretations that minimize its local complexity and reduce it to primitive anthropology. As an indigenous knowledge system, "besa" maintained social order without police or courts, fostered collective identity through reciprocal obligations, and ensured cultural continuity in the absence of state institutions, profoundly distinguishing it from modern individualistic and contractual legal models.

Besa narratives constitute a significant pedagogical instrument for advancing intercultural education, enhancing teacher professional development, and facilitating interpretive approaches to cultural tourism, which necessitates the formulation of national policy frameworks that systematically incorporate this traditional institution into sustainable tourism education, pedagogical programming, and strategic mechanisms for the promotion of Albanian ethnographic heritage.

4.3 Landscape Relations and Environmental Knowledge

Travel writings reveal sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems concerning landscape, ecology, and resource management. Liebert (1909) provides systematic documentation of transhumance practices, describing the annual migration between

winter lowlands and summer mountain pastures as a carefully calibrated system based on a deep understanding of microclimates, vegetation cycles, and local meteorological forecasts. Steinmetz (1904) documents communal resource management practices, describing rotation systems and fallow periods that prevented overgrazing and land degradation, demonstrating rational management of common-pool resources.

Le Queue (1907) contributes detailed observations on indigenous botanical knowledge, highlighting recognition of medicinal plants and their traditional uses. Siebertz (1910) emphasizes the spiritual and ritual dimensions of landscape relations, describing ceremonies of respect toward mountains and water sources as expressions of an integrated cosmology. These findings document indigenous knowledge systems that enabled sustainable inhabitation of challenging mountain environments for centuries, with knowledge embedded in daily practice, transmitted through practical apprenticeship, and strongly linked to social organization and cultural identity.

These travel descriptions document environmental knowledge as living intangible heritage, an indigenous knowledge system that regulated daily life, yet challenge our insider-outsider methodology through lack of local context and Eurocentric interpretations that dismiss them as primitive superstitions. Landscape relations ensured cultural continuity and social order in the absence of state institutions, profoundly distinguishing them from modern individualistic and exploitative technological models. As pedagogical resources, these narratives serve intercultural education, tourist guide training, and interpretive ecotourism development, necessitating national policies that integrate indigenous knowledge into sustainable tourism curricula, protected area management strategies, and environmental education programs.

4.4 Customary Law (Kanun) and Indigenous Legal Systems

All travelers devoted considerable attention to the Kanun, the customary legal code that regulated social relations, property, marriages, inheritance, and conflict resolution. Steinmetz (1904) describes the Kanun as unwritten yet complete and known with extraordinary consistency across all regions, highlighting the collective memorization of thousands of rules. Le Queue (1907) emphasizes the restorative rather than punitive nature of Kanun justice, describing complex systems of mediation, blood compensation, and family reconciliation. Liebert (1909) documents the central role of elders as legal authorities who derived legitimacy from personal reputation, life experience, and deep traditional knowledge rather than from state appointment. Siebertz (1910) documents pedagogical aspects, highlighting how young people learned both essential provisions and procedural skills through councils of elders and public debates. These parallel accounts establish the Kanun as a sophisticated local legal system that integrated legal norms with broader cultural

values, collective morality, and local cosmology, relying on social mechanisms, reputation, and reciprocity rather than violence.

These travel accounts document the Kanun as an intangible legal heritage that regulated complex social practices. The Kanun maintained social order without the aid of police or state courts, shaped collective identity through shared norms, and ensured cultural continuity in the absence of state institutions, thereby distinguishing itself profoundly from modern, individualistic, contractual, and formalistic legal systems. Kanun narratives constitute a significant pedagogical instrument for advancing intercultural education, enhancing teacher professional development, and facilitating interpretive approaches to cultural tourism, thereby necessitating the formulation of national policy frameworks that systematically incorporate this traditional legal system into educational curricula, sustainable tourism initiatives, and contemporary restorative justice mechanisms.

5. Discussion

5.1 Travel Writings as Contact Zones and Intercultural Mediation

The findings are interpreted through Pratt's (1992) concept of "contact zones," spaces where cultures meet under asymmetrical power conditions. Despite inherent asymmetry, moments of genuine intercultural mediation occur where authors struggle to understand practices in cultural terms rather than simply dismissing them. Liebert (1909) stands out for intercultural sensitivity, consistently attempting to interpret practices within a social-ecological context. However, all travelers remain limited by their positionality as European male elites within particular historical contexts. Yet within these constraints, texts preserve valuable evidence creating archives that current researchers can read both with and against the grain. Contemporary value lies in educational potential for intercultural competence development, providing concrete historical examples for theoretical discussions of representation, power, and cultural encounter.

5.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Contemporary Relevance

The documented practices reveal considerable complexity in resolving core challenges related to social coordination, resource allocation, and intergenerational cultural preservation in contexts lacking formalized institutional frameworks. The "besa" institution offers a compelling ethical framework with contemporary relevance, providing an alternative model based on unconditional obligation to the other. Transhumance demonstrates sustainable environmental practices integrating economic needs, ecological knowledge, and social organization.

The Kanun, despite problematic aspects, demonstrates effective legal governance based on community consensus and restorative justice. Contemporary relevance lies not in romantic nostalgia but in demonstrating alternative possibilities challenging Western modernity hegemony, revealing that concepts like hospitality, justice, and sustainability can be operationalized in radically different ways.

5.3 Implications for Intercultural Education and Heritage Pedagogy

The travel writings offer rich pedagogical resources at multiple levels. As primary sources documenting cultural diversity, they provide concrete material for teaching about alternative social organizations and ethical frameworks, developing cultural relativism without uncritical acceptance. The texts model critical analysis of cultural representation, requiring students to examine how observers' assumptions shape descriptions. The analytical process provides methodological training in qualitative research. The content addresses urgent contemporary issues through historical examples that denaturalize current arrangements and reveal alternatives. For teacher education, these materials model how to teach cultural diversity without essentializing, how to engage difficult historical sources responsibly, and how to connect historical material to contemporary issues.

5.4 Applications for Interpretive Cultural Tourism Development

Cultural tourism in Northern Albania can be developed interpretively, using travelers' narratives for "in their footsteps" itineraries, landscapes, towers, and villages. The interpretation explores changes from modernism and globalization. The ethical approach involves local communities as partners: heritage selection, representation, and economic benefits with cultural control.

Within the framework of inclusivity, this study demonstrates that travel writings do not serve as passive historical documents but as active instruments for intercultural dialogue in the contemporary context. The documentation of practices such as besa from external perspectives creates a unique space for cultural self-reflection, enabling the reevaluation of Albanian heritage through alternative viewpoints. This observation fosters a mediating dialogue between insider and outsider perspectives, where cultural identities are negotiated and reformulated without compromising authenticity.

The analysis reveals that the indigenous knowledge systems in these texts are not historical relics, but applicable models for modern social organization. Besa, for example, offers an ethical framework that transcends individualism, promoting solidarity relevant to humanitarian crises and migration. Far from perceptions as "primitive," it embodies an advanced philosophy of social interdependence that can guide contemporary hospitality and integration policies.

The study's interdisciplinary methodology, which integrates literary studies, cultural anthropology, and heritage studies, highlights the value of multifaceted analyses of historical sources. By treating travel writings as ethnographic repositories, ideological narratives, and discursive performances, it opens pathways for nuanced interpretations, particularly in the Balkans, where sources are fragmented and influenced by competing narratives.

The findings contribute to the globalization-local resistance debate, demonstrating that Northern Albanian communities historically developed adaptive mechanisms for

negotiating with external influences without complete assimilation. This resilience offers lessons for contemporary societies facing similar challenges.

6. Educational Policy Recommendations and Social Pedagogy Applications

The research findings have direct implications for educational policy and social pedagogy in contemporary European contexts. This section develops specific recommendations connecting documented indigenous knowledge systems to current educational challenges.

6.1 Integration into Formal Educational Curricula

Educational systems across Europe increasingly recognize the fundamental need to prepare students for engagement in culturally diverse societies and effective global citizenship in an interconnected world. The documented cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems from Northern Albania offer valuable and distinctive content for social studies curricula, citizenship education programs, and intercultural learning initiatives at secondary and higher levels.

At the secondary level, curriculum units can use historical travel writings as primary sources for understanding alternative social organizations. Students engage with examples of how societies addressed universal challenges through practices grounded in different values than those dominant in contemporary Western societies. This direct engagement with alternative cultural models develops sophisticated cultural relativism and comparative thinking skills without encouraging uncritical relativism, as students must simultaneously grapple with both the evident sophistication and effectiveness of indigenous systems and their specific limitations or fundamental incompatibilities with contemporary values such as gender equality, universal human rights, and democratic governance.

Teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service training, should systematically incorporate preparation for the responsible teaching of complex historical sources that simultaneously contain valuable ethnographic data alongside problematic cultural assumptions, biases, or ideological perspectives. The analytical methodology developed and demonstrated in this study, encompassing reading texts both with and against the grain, systematic triangulation of multiple independent sources, precise contextualization within appropriate historical and political frameworks, and consistent linkage of historical material to contemporary relevance and current social issues, offers a practical, theoretically robust model for educators' use of challenging and potentially controversial materials in diverse classroom environments. Training programs should also explicitly address pedagogical strategies for fostering productive, respectful dialogues on cultural difference, historical representation, power dynamics, and identity politics, while avoiding the unintentional reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, the essentialization of cultural groups, or the generation of divisive classroom dynamics.

Formal programs in intercultural competence development and global citizenship education can strategically use the documented historical practices as concrete, vivid examples for teaching about significant cultural variation in fundamental human concepts and practices, including hospitality ethics, personal and collective honor, justice and conflict resolution, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Carefully designed role-playing activities, structured simulations of cultural encounters, and guided case study discussions can help students progressively develop essential perspective-taking skills, recognize and question their own often unconscious cultural assumptions, and practice navigating complex intercultural situations with sensitivity and respect. The historical examples provide pedagogically valuable material that is typically emotionally safer and less politically charged than contemporary cultural conflicts, while simultaneously developing transferable analytical and interpersonal skills applicable to navigating real-world cultural encounters in increasingly diverse educational institutions, workplaces, and communities.

6.2 Social Pedagogy and Community-Based Learning Approaches

Social pedagogy prioritizes active learning through community engagement, intergenerational exchange, and authentic participation in living cultural practices over passive information reception. The living heritage framework enables applications preserving endangered knowledge while strengthening community identity.

Oral history projects facilitate student-community collaboration, documenting local practices, indigenous knowledge, and oral traditions from elders. These serve multiple functions: preserving at-risk knowledge; validating elders' expertise in age-marginalizing societies; developing students' research and documentation skills; and enhancing community cohesion through shared heritage engagement. Projects targeting historically documented themes (hospitality, environmental knowledge, conflict resolution) bridge past practices with present realities, revealing continuities and transformations.

Community cultural centers integrate historical documentation with living practices, hosting practitioner workshops, elder storytelling sessions, and structured cultural dialogues. Historical travel writings provide narrative frameworks; contemporary voices ensure authenticity, cultural protocols, and relevance to community priorities.

University service-learning programs support community-defined heritage documentation, interpretive tourism, and cultural education initiatives. Reciprocal partnerships leverage student research, technological, and communication skills to address clearly articulated community needs, fostering students' intercultural competence, ethical awareness, and civic engagement while respecting community autonomy and self-determination.

6.3 Policy Frameworks for Living Heritage Preservation and Educational Integration

Successful living heritage educational applications require national policy frameworks explicitly recognizing living heritage alongside monumental heritage in designations, funding, and institutions.

Educational standards must integrate living heritage, indigenous knowledge, and cultural diversity as cross-disciplinary learning objectives, emphasizing critical cultural analysis, intercultural competence, and respect for diverse knowledge systems beyond isolated heritage courses. This ensures universal competency development for diverse societies, irrespective of academic tracks.

Teacher certification for social studies must mandate demonstrated intercultural pedagogy, critical source analysis, and dialogue facilitation competencies, preventing stereotypes, essentialization, and divisiveness. Pre-service programs require dedicated time, theoretical grounding, and supervised diverse practicum experiences.

Policies must incentivize educational-community partnerships through funding for community priorities, liability frameworks, and academic recognition systems. Absent these, faculty/institutions face barriers to time-intensive collaborations despite educational value.

Public funding should prioritize community-led oral history collection, endangered practice documentation, and digital archiving, respecting cultural protocols and community control. These measures preserve endangered ethnographic heritage while creating accessible educational tools that prioritize local community interests over external commercial or institutional beneficiaries.

7. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that early twentieth-century European travel writings on Northern Albania constitute archives of living heritage, with implications for indigenous knowledge, identity, and intercultural education. Qualitative analysis of four key texts: Steinmetz, Le Queux, Liebert, and Siebertz, reveals cultural practices as mechanisms of social order, solidarity, and continuity in the absence of state institutions.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions and Conceptual Advances

This research advances heritage studies, intercultural education, and indigenous knowledge systems theory by demonstrating living heritage's applicability to Balkan contexts where transmission occurred through embodied practice, oral tradition, and apprenticeship rather than written codification. Documented practices exemplify heritage sustained through continuous performance and adaptation within daily social interactions.

The analysis extends Pratt's (1992) contact zones concept, revealing travel writings as spaces of intercultural mediation despite power asymmetries. Recognizing the limitations of the European male perspective, the study extracts valuable ethnographic evidence through against-the-grain readings.

It challenges narratives that portray indigenous knowledge as primitive by demonstrating documented systems' sophistication and relevance to contemporary challenges, including migration, environmental crisis, social cohesion, and restorative justice.

7.2 Educational Applications and Practical Implications

These research outcomes offer immediate relevance for pedagogical practice and educational policy development. The analyzed practices and historical travel accounts constitute valuable material for social studies curricula and intercultural competence training, illustrating effective approaches to teaching cultural diversity through historical case studies. The methodological framework establishes guidelines for equipping educators to engage critically and responsibly with multifaceted historical sources. This study reveals opportunities for developing ethically grounded interpretive tourism that bridges historical documentation with present-day cultural exchanges through collaborative community engagement. Furthermore, the living heritage approach indicates potential implementation in oral history initiatives, community-based cultural institutions, and cross-generational knowledge transmission programs.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study acknowledges significant limitations requiring future investigation. The exclusive reliance on early twentieth-century European male travelers' perspectives, while inherent to the historical archive, necessitates complementary research incorporating Albanian sources, women's voices, and non-elite narratives. Contemporary oral history projects could trace continuities and transformations in documented practices. The study's specific temporal boundaries and geographic parameters warrant comparative analyses encompassing multiple historical periods and regional contexts to determine wider applicability. Recommended educational and tourism applications necessitate practical implementation accompanied by rigorous evaluation utilizing action research approaches. Crucially, future scholarly inquiry must cultivate genuine partnerships with Northern Albanian community stakeholders, implementing participatory methodologies that privilege community-defined priorities throughout research conceptualization and interpretive processes.

7.4 Final Reflections on Living Heritage and Contemporary Society

Within contemporary European contexts characterized by increasing cultural plurality, environmental sustainability imperatives, and contested globalization processes, the documented indigenous knowledge systems of Northern Albania offer significant alternative conceptual frameworks. The besa ethic articulates principles

of unconditional hospitality and collective social responsibility that challenge prevailing discourses surrounding migration and cultural difference. Traditional transhumance practices exemplify sustainable human-environment relationships grounded in place-based ecological knowledge systems. The Kanun legal tradition demonstrates community-based mechanisms for conflict mediation and restorative justice implementation. These cultural systems function as active intellectual and practical resources for contemporary ethical deliberation and social organization, transcending their characterization as static ethnographic artifacts or museum objects. Living heritage, conceptualized as dynamic cultural processes rather than fixed traditions, serves multiple contemporary purposes: facilitating intercultural dialogue, advancing global citizenship education, and contributing to sustainable development frameworks. Examining how historical societies structured social relations, transmitted cultural knowledge across generations, and maintained communal coherence yields essential analytical resources for addressing contemporary societal challenges. Living heritage offers not transplantable solutions but critical questions, imaginable alternatives, and inspiration for creative adaptation.

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