

# The Rituals of Llazore and Rusica in the Village of Polena (Albania) between Past and Present

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This paper provides an overview of two spring calendrical rituals, llazore and rusica, historically and contemporarily practiced in Polena, a village in Southeast Albania's Korça region. These rituals, linked to Orthodox Christian feasts, are vital to the community's cultural and religious life. Despite challenges like globalization, societal changes, and demographic shifts, the rituals persist, reflecting the local community's commitment to preserving and transmitting them. The study examines the rituals' historical context, evolution, and enduring role in maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion amid modern challenges.

**Key words:** rituals, calendrical feasts, adaptation of tradition, llazore, rusica, Albania

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The paper aims to provide an overview of two spring calendrical rituals, llazore and rusica, performed historically and contemporarily in the village of Polena, located in the Korça region of Southeast Albania. These rituals are integral to the community's cultural and religious life, intertwining with the Orthodox Christian feasts of Saint Lazarus, celebrated one week before Easter, and Mid-Pentecost, observed 25 days after Easter.

Despite various factors, such as globalization, societal changes, urban developments, demographic shifts, and emigration, all of which have impacted the community's social life, the rituals of llazore and rusica persist. These rituals, though they have undergone structural changes, continue to be performed due to the pivotal role of the local community in preserving and transmitting them across generations. These ongoing rituals affirm the local cultural and religious identity and foster social cohesion among the residents.

The paper explores the historical context and status of these rituals, demonstrating how their structure and significance have evolved while maintaining their essential

role in the community's cultural heritage. Through an anthropological lens, the study sheds light on the resilience of these traditions and their adaptation in the face of modern challenges, emphasizing the community's efforts to uphold their cultural continuity.

## Methodology

The ethnographic research, conducted between 2022 and 2024, employs a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, structured questionnaires, personal narratives and informal online interviews.<sup>1</sup> The integration of ethnographic accounts, literature reviews, and visual materials provide a comprehensive perspective on the rituals. This holistic approach facilitated a thorough understanding of the rituals by examining the social, cultural, and historical factors shaping the community's life.

A notable aspect of the research is the gendered composition of the interviewees, with women and girls constituting approximately 80% of the participants and bearers. The participants' age range spans from 6 to 82 years old.

This gendered focus highlights the pivotal role of women in the performance and transmission of these rituals, underscoring their importance in maintaining cultural continuity within the community.

### The Village of Polena

Polena, a village situated in the western part of the Korça district in southeastern Albania, is characterized by its predominantly Albanian Orthodox population. Regular religious celebrations, which are integral to the community, serve dual purposes: they are expressions of religious observance and foster social cohesion among the residents. The strong emphasis on religious celebrations is intricately tied to the Orthodox faith that defines the Polena community and is further reinforced by the cultural and social homogeneity that the village has maintained over time. The population of the village has continuously migrated within and especially abroad.

Historical documents and local testimonies corroborate the fact that both the residents of Polena and its diaspora have been instrumental in preserving the village's traditions. In 1904, emigrants from Polena established "The-Beneficiary Brotherhood of Polena" in the United States of America (Terolli – Koroveshi 2022). This association significantly contributed to community organization, collecting the earnings of emigrants, and investing these funds to enhance the lives of Polena's residents. According to both oral traditions and written records, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the initial funds were utilized to reclaim lands from the Ottoman administration, subsequently returning these territories to the local inhabitants. The remaining funds were allocated to various community projects (Terolli – Koroveshi 2022: 213–214).

The historical context of Polena has significantly shaped the psychology of its inhabitants, contributing to a certain degree of cultural isolation while also aiding in the preservation of local traditions. The cultural homogeneity of the village is rooted in the endogenous cultural practices maintained by its residents. Due to its historical past and a desire to preserve the social fabric, religious, and cultural traditions, the community of Polena has upheld social homogeneity through a reluctance to sell houses to non-residents. "*Even today, someone cannot buy a house in Polena, even though there are vacant houses,*" they assert.

Locals recount various stories about the relationships and socio-cultural barriers they have established with outsiders. A bearer shared that:

*"A long time ago, when the village made the law, a new family settled in Polena. Since the family was engaged in raising sheep, this caused problems with the village's properties and lands. At that time, it was a rule in the village not to keep sheep. For this reason, one night the villagers broke into their house, and the family was forced to leave Polena. The family did not obey the village laws; they had broken the rules. If this conservatism had not existed, these customs would not have been preserved.*

*Another story occurred after the 1990s, following the fall of the communist system. A military family settled in the village. Although they bought a house in Polena, they soon found themselves isolated. As the village began to reorganize religious traditions and rituals, this family felt excluded and eventually left the village."* (K. M, 60-year-old woman, personal communication, 2023, Polena)

Although exceedingly uncommon, intra-clan marriages were occasionally observed. Religious endogamy was, and still is, widely observed. Until World War II, marriages predominantly occurred within the village to strengthen community ties. It was only after 1990, with political changes and increased emigration, that inter-religious marriages began to occur, albeit in very small numbers. These endogenous practices have played a crucial role in preserving the village's social homogeneity, maintaining its cultural and social fabric, and ensuring the continuity of rituals and traditions.

In contemporary times, heightened awareness among residents and the church has led to active monitoring of the preservation of traditions and customs in Polena. The community highly values these feasts and rituals, viewing them as essential elements of the village's cultural identity. The Polena community has consistently maintained a strong connection to religious values, mutual support, and local traditions. This social cohesion has facilitated continuous collaboration among locals to uphold their traditions. Some of the most important feasts celebrated in the village of Polena include the Feast of Saint Basil the Great, the Feast of the Holy Water, the Ritual of the Arap, the Feast of Saint Athanasius, Easter, the Summer Day, the Rusica, the

Ilazore, the Feast of Saint George, and the Mute Water. Most of these celebrations are religious in nature, reflecting the community's deep-rooted Orthodox Christian faith and its integral role in maintaining the village's cultural religious heritage.

Polena celebrates two calendrical feasts, "Saint Lazarus" and "Mid-Pentecost." The Feast of Saint Lazarus is celebrated eight days before Easter, while Mid-Pentecost is observed twenty-five days after Easter. Both are movable feasts, determined by the Orthodox liturgical calendar.

These feasts encompass popular rituals within their structure, known as the rituals of Ilazore and rusica. Despite their religious designation, these feasts have pagan origins that were integrated into religious observances following the advent of Christianity. Locals recognize them as rituals associated with the Feast of Saint Lazarus and the Feast of Mid-Pentecost. However, residents commonly refer to these feasts by the names of their rituals in everyday speech, such as "Ilazore" and "rusica," and they never mention the term "ritual." Religious feasts contain within their structure their own specific rituals. While the ritual is fundamentally a formalized sequence of actions, the feast is, above all, a collective experience (Apolito 2014: 97). Consequently, the community recognizes them as feasts and never refers to them using the term "ritual."

According to ritual anthropologists, rituals establish a distinction between officiants and participants, creating a center and a periphery, and assigning specific hierarchical roles to participants. In contrast, feasts can blur these distinctions and multiply the centers, fostering a more inclusive and collective experience (Clemente 1981: 46–57). During the fieldwork, the bearers consistently demonstrated collaboration and the inclusive participation of all members, emphasizing the festivity aspect of these events. As a result, the bearers perceive Ilazore and Rusica primarily as feasts rather than rituals.

As the primary bearers of these rituals are children, the demographic decline in rural areas, driven by migration to urban centers, significantly impacts the continuity and integrity of these traditions. Today, the preservation of these rituals relies on the collective effort of the entire community, particularly the involvement of women,

older women, the Women's Association of Polena, and teachers. The association plays a crucial role not only in organizing and sustaining the rituals but also in engaging in various other activities and events that support community cohesion and cultural heritage.

### The Ritual of Ilazore

The Ilazore is a spring ritual typically performed in honor of the religious feast of Saint Lazarus. Originally a pagan ritual, Ilazore was integrated into the Orthodox liturgical calendar, adopting its name from Saint Lazarus. The ritual takes place on the Saturday eight days before Easter, coinciding with the day of Saint Lazarus' celebration. For women, the Ilazore is a feast related to Saint Lazarus, but as a ritual, it primarily symbolizes fertility and youth reflected in the symbolism of the doll used in the ritual and the songs connected to it.

In Albania, this ritual manifests in various forms. In some villages, it is no longer preserved as a ritual; in others, it is practiced as a mixed ritual combining pagan and religious elements. In urban areas, such as the city of Divjaka, it is maintained only in its pagan forms and is associated with the summer day.

Until 1967, the rituals and festivals were performed, although not entirely openly (Sadiku 2023: 56–72; Hankollari 2023). Common understandings and a commitment to preserving the village's structure have enabled the transmission of these practices across generations, often in unobserved ways. Ritual activities such as cooking traditional foods, sharing meals, singing, and other practices were typically exchanged within families or among close relatives. In secret, the women gathered eggs, flour, and oil to cook ritual foods. As the bearers expressed, "*no one outside the village could know about the ritual, as everyone knew each other.*" The performance of the ritual resumed in 1992, following the fall of the communist regime in Albania.

Nowadays, the ritual of Ilazore is performed by groups of girls, typically aged 9 to 12 years old. The girls wake up early and, starting at 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning, go from house to house singing the song of the Ilazore. Usually there are three girls in the group. Nowadays there are 1 or 2 groups of girls who perform the ritual of Ilazore. The Ilazore ritual song is performed during the practice of begging. The girls sing this song:

*Llazore, llazore  
Busi me, me sime  
Rafitono rosero  
Fili trëndafiliko*

*Jarse margarito  
cupa djem martuaro  
për shumë vjet  
gëzuar o  
llazore, llazore<sup>2</sup>*

In the llazore song, derived from the text, certain words are Albanian while others lack semantic meaning. It is sung to boys and girls, wishing them prosperity and celebrating the llazore.

Due to the limited number of children in the village, a single group of girls is responsible for the ritual. They receive eggs and flour from housewives, who provide these items in baskets. After collecting these provisions, the girls distribute them among themselves and proceed to prepare the ritual food in their respective homes. This group of girls plays a pivotal role in the performance of the ritual, ensuring its continuity and safeguarding its cultural significance.

The practice of begging is part of various calendrical rituals. During this practice, goods, generally food, are requested and distributed by subjects designated to



Fig. 1. Girls performing the ritual of llazore, April 2016. Photo courtesy Jonida Sela and Fredi Mancì

play the role of beggar, in the case of llazore, by young girls. Begging is a dynamic exchange between humans and perceived entities capable of influencing life cycles, and functions as a mechanism for securing divine favor and ensuring the community's survival and prosperity (Buttitta 2006: 106). By engaging in ritual begging, communities not only seek material goods, but also reinforce their connection to the supernatural, aligning their temporal activities with the cosmic order, ensuring the cycles of planting, growth, and harvest are blessed and fruitful (Buttitta 2006).

During the entire ritual, the girls carry a doll that accompanies them throughout the proceedings. Traditionally crafted by the village women, this doll's production was traditionally handled collectively. In recent times, this responsibility has been undertaken by two individuals – an old woman and a teacher – who have committed



Fig. 2. The handmade doll. The doll was crafted by an old woman of the village in April 2023. Photo by Dorina Arapi

to preserving this tradition and passing it on to subsequent generations. At present, the teacher continues the craft of doll-making for the llazore ritual, holding the sole responsibility for its perpetuation. As an educator, she imparts her knowledge of doll-making to her students at school and to her daughters, ensuring the continuity of this significant cultural practice. Once, it was customary for young girls to bring a handkerchief and some thread to an elderly woman, who would then construct the doll using a piece of wood and fabric (Sela 2019). This doll is referred to as “Saint Lazarus,” “the llazore,” or simply “the doll” (Sela 2023: 49–56).

Typically, beggars are characterized by wearing special costumes, masks, and other material symbols that distinguish them. These elements often play a role in their identity and performance within rituals or cultural practices. In the llazore ritual, however, there is a noted absence of costumes or masks on the beggars. This contrasts with the usual depiction of beggars in other contexts where such costumes and masks are common to this ritual. According to local memory, the practice of wearing costumes or masks during the llazore ritual has not been preserved. During fieldwork, I observed differing perceptions regarding the practice of masking during the llazore ritual.



Fig. 3. Girls singing the song of llazore, April 2024.  
Photo by Dorina Arapi

However, they emphasize that until 1967, Roma women from Korça came to the village for the llazore, dressed up in a strange way, singing and carrying a doll made of cloth tied to their belly. *Nuska*, as it is referred to by the women, symbolized brides and good fate. They used to sing the song for prosperity, fertility and good luck.

Today, the community of bearers includes elderly women, young girls, and primary school teachers, who together form the keepers of village traditions. Some bearers engage in the creation of the doll, while others focus on transmitting the ritual's performance. Teachers and elderly women, especially grandmothers, are responsible for passing down the ritual songs of the llazore, ritual food and meaning related to the ritual.

Emigration, migration, urban development, and demographic changes may contribute to the instability of the ritual. The ritual is at risk of loss because as expressed by the bearers, “*there are no more young girls in this village that can practice it.*”



Fig. 4. Making the dolls for the llazore ritual, April 2024.  
Photo by Dorina Arapi

### The Ritual of the Rusica

The rusica ritual, observed 25 days after Easter during Mid-Pentecost, holds significant cultural importance in the Orthodox community of Polena, as referred to in local parlance. The Mid-Feast of Pentecost, traditionally celebrated on the Wednesday of the fourth week following Pascha (Easter), holds significance as the midpoint between two crucial feasts within the Orthodox Christian liturgical calendar.

In Albania, this ritual has traditionally been preserved exclusively by women. Historically documented by scholar R. Elsie, the tradition involved gatherings of women in churches or monasteries to partake in a modest meal featuring red eggs and milk. Such was its cultural resonance that in 1987 state authorities imposed restrictions on milk distribution in the city of Pogradec to curb preparations for the ritual (Elsie 2001: 222).

During the communist era in Albania, starting from 1967, the rusica ritual was prohibited, severely limiting its observance to merely preparing dishes. Despite these constraints, gathering remained a vital aspect for women during this period.

Following the fall of communism in Albania in 1990, the community began to revive the rusica ritual. Older generations took on the role of passing down the traditions to younger generations while adapting and refining its practices over time. This rejuvenation process allowed the ritual to evolve and continue to hold significance within the cultural fabric of the community, demonstrating its resilience and enduring cultural value beyond historical and political challenges. Presently, it remains a pivotal tradition within the community and the most deeply experienced feast and ritual in the Polena community.

For the rusica, little girls equipped with baskets, aged 6 to 14, visit village households in the morning, to collect oil, flour, and butter. Usually there are 3 girls in the group. Nowadays there are one or two groups of girls who perform the ritual of rusica. Due to the low number of children in the village, there is only one group of girls who perform it.

The little girls sing the song of rusica, as follows:

*Rusica, rusica  
Na dërgoi Rusica  
Për një kupë miell  
Ta bëjmë një meshë*

*Ta shpjemë në kishë  
Ta ndajmë naforë  
Për Zonë Shën Kollë  
Rusica, rusica*<sup>3</sup>

Rusica's song is sung to the little girls brought by Rusica. The song requests flour to make bread for the mass, connecting the ritual with Saint Nicholas.

After gathering the ingredients, the girls pool financial contributions from the community, and from the funds, they purchase additional supplies such as flour, butter, oil, and sugar to prepare various dishes including pies, bread rolls, and desserts. Also, women form groups based on their friendships and neighborhood affiliations and gather in a designated house. After pooling together a sum of money, they purchase flour, sugar, and oil, which they use to cook food, such as pies or sweets. They then share the prepared food among themselves, consuming a portion together and taking the remainder back to their families. In the evening, women gather in neighborhood groups to celebrate with dancing and singing, fostering a sense of communal solidarity and cultural continuity.

According to oral accounts, young girls participate in the ritual by dressing in oversized clothes, either male or female attire, as a bearer observed, in order to look like "outsiders" or as if they were coming from distant places, sent by a woman named Rusica to ask for food. The little girls are named "the little Rusica-s."

One of the oldest bearers of the community describes the rusica feast and ritual as follows:

*"Rusica is not a religious celebration. On this day, girls convene because boys have their own separate celebration. The girls visit nearly all the houses, particularly those in which they have acquaintances. They collect food, and the mothers of two of the girls prepare pies and other dishes for them. The young girls dress up and paint their faces, then walk around the village before returning to their homes. Rusica is celebrated exclusively by girls and women. A piece of pie is also given to an elderly woman to prevent her from contracting what is referred to as the 'Rusa disease.' The older generations maintain that consuming this pie prevents the Rusa disease.*

*Historically, during the socialist period, orchestras were organized, and gatherings took place in schools or cultural centers. Men were not permitted to participate; only women were involved, engaging in music and dance.*

*In the 1960s, songs such as “Bella Ciao” were performed. The celebration of rusica also included theatrical performances. One of the women would dress up like a Roma woman, paint her face black, and entertain the other women with jokes, claiming, ‘I came from here, and I am looking for a girl.’*

*Over time, the use of orchestras diminished due to the cooperative system. When the cooperative was established, women were divided into brigades. To continue the rusica celebrations, albeit covertly, three women from each brigade would cook while the other women assisted with the work to meet their production quotas. Even when religious practices were suppressed, the celebration persisted because it was more of a cultural tradition than a religious event. Although somewhat concealed, the women would still inquire, ‘Are we going to do some Rusica?’ (M. V, 82 years old woman, interview June 2022, Polena)*

*In 1998, oral accounts and visual data show that there are some characters that the girls used to dress up as in costumes, such as a bride, a groom, and old ladies. Nowadays, girls do not dress up in costumes anymore.*

*The feast and its associated ritual are characterized by two distinct facets: the religious and the pagan. The religious aspect is intertwined with institutional elements of faith, specifically centered around the mid-Pentecost festival. In contrast, the pagan dimension encompasses folk traditions and communal rituals, such as the participation of girls and the communal sharing of food, primarily orchestrated by the community of women and girls.*

*This dualistic framework lies between adherence to the formal religious protocols associated with the mid-Pentecost feast and the embrace of the more prevalent and traditional aspects of the feast (Buttitta 2010). The dynamic lies in harmonizing the prescribed religious observances with the community-driven, culturally significant pagan rituals that have been transmitted across generations.*

*K. M. is a dress designer and serves as the president of the women’s association in Polena village. The president and the committee are responsible for organizing various events, including religious feasts, rituals, and trips abroad. This association aims to coordinate and enhance women’s activities within the village. Every four years, a president is elected to ensure effective organization and leadership. She narrates the ritual of rusica as follows:*

*“Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers celebrated this festival, but my generation was alienated*

*from these traditions during the Socialist era, and we did not experience these sentiments.*

*In the morning, young girls were dressed in adult attire, either as women or men. The idea behind this disguise was to make them unrecognizable, as if they had come from a foreign land, sent by a woman named Rusica. The young girls were referred to as little Rusicas.*

*The girls would go from house to house, singing the song of the rusicas. At that time, there was not the abundance that exists today, and giving a cup of wheat flour was a significant gesture. This act was done to demonstrate how welcoming they were towards strangers. The first ingredient they collected was flour, which was gathered in larger quantities than needed for baking a mass. The baked loaf of bread was consumed on Sunday, and it was divided into small pieces, which were shared among all community members. With the remaining ingredients, two to three traditional village dishes were prepared. In the afternoon, in the old village square or in meadows, musicians were invited, and women would sing and dance. In earlier times, women did not play a decisive role in society, and this feast provided a way for girls to come out, socialize, and be seen. The women would share the food. The most enjoyable part was when two or three women dressed as men, disguised with hats and moustaches, would come to the square, tell jokes, and playfully ‘kidnap’ a girl for amusement. This was before the advent of communism.*

*During the years of communism, the celebration of rusica was significantly diminished, if not entirely suppressed, and any observance that did occur was often conducted in secret. During this period, women primarily focused on cooking and fostering connections with one another. The tradition of walking from door to door and singing songs with young girls was not practiced at all.*

*Following the fall of the Communist regime in the 1990s, the tradition was revived. Elders passed down the knowledge of how the feast used to be celebrated, and year after year, through observation and participation, the community gradually organized the festivities with added elements. New elements, such as more elaborate disguises, were introduced, but the core essence of the feast remained unchanged.*

*In recent years, however, the tradition has seen significant change due to decreasing participation by children, who often attend school outside of Polena. Consequently,*

*the dressing up and masking now take place after the children return from school, typically after lunch. The girls are dressed by their mothers in adult attire, either as women or men, though dressing as men has become less common because the children prefer not to.*

*One constant element throughout the years has been the preparation of the loaf of bread for church. One of the girls' mothers takes a portion of flour to make the sacramental bread for the mass, which is then baked and sent to the village priest's house or the church to be consumed on Sunday, the day of the mass.*

*While the women cook together, they engage in playful banter and tease the young girls, saying, 'We'll see today which boy will kidnap you.' This joking reflects the lighthearted and communal spirit of the celebration.*

*Before the women gather for dinner to celebrate Rusica, they decide who will sing and what activities will take place, often organizing it spontaneously based on the circumstances. The feast, while rooted in religious traditions, has evolved with elements being added, removed, or modernized over time. Rusica symbolizes production, abundance, and fertility, reflecting a time when women no longer need to conserve resources because of their anticipated abundance, thus celebrating this prosperity.*

*Rusica is a beloved feast within the community. New brides who marry into Polena find it an excellent way to integrate into village life, as they are eagerly welcomed into the celebrations. Preparations for the feast begin a week in advance, involving meticulous planning and coordination. My mother did not pass this feast down to me because it was suppressed during the communist era, but I have passed it down to my daughters. As soon as they were old enough, I started dressing them up and explaining the significance of the feast.*

*According to stories from a Polena priest, rusica was historically a church feast that emphasized the role and importance of women, as many religious celebrations were predominantly male-oriented. The mid-Pentecost feast, celebrated to renew faith after Easter, aligns with the idea that women, through their diligent nature, are key to this renewal.*

*If we consider only the gathering of women, the communal cooking, or the notion of 'welcoming a stranger into the village', rusica can be viewed as having pagan origins. Historically, as my mother recounted, the old religious calendar maintained by the priest once marked*

*the feast of rusica. However, after the socio-political upheavals of the 1990s, this calendar no longer exists, and today the celebration aligns with the day of Mid-Pentecost." (K. M., 50-year-old woman, personal communication, June 2022, Polena)*

This personal narrative demonstrates how rituals and feasts evolve and adapt within social, economic, and historical contexts, enabling them to endure through societal transformations. Further evidence is drawn from the ethnographic materials compiled by researchers and educators prior to World War II. These accounts reveal that a feast consists of multiple rituals, each shaped by historical and community circumstances. Over time, certain rituals may fade away while others endure or gain prominence, reflecting ongoing changes in societal values and practices.

For example, Albanian ethnologist M. Tirta has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the intriguing ritual known as the "Burial of the Mother of the Sun," once practiced in the Devoll region of Korça until the outbreak of World War II. According to Tirta, this ritual was linked to an agricultural deity and symbolized the cyclical nature of life and death, signifying the renewal of the year's harvest. Today, however, the ritual of the doll burial has ceased to be performed in these communities and has gradually faded from memory. Tirta describes the ritual as follows:

*"On this day, women and girls from the village would convene and celebrate collectively with a feast that included bread, pies, beans, and sweets. After lunch, they would create a mud doll called the 'Mother of the Sun,' place it in a small trench, and ceremoniously bury it outside the village. The burial was conducted with the solemnity appropriate to a death ceremony, and the girls would weep as if mourning a human, lamenting, 'Mother, oh mother, the Sun arrived, and it didn't find you.' After the burial, the participants would visit all the houses in the village, distributing small portions of the collected ingredients to bless each household with abundance. In some instances, boiled grain was also distributed." (Tirta 2004: 259)*

Albanian ethnomusicologist Ramadan Sokoli also examined this practice but conflated it with the llazore ritual, asserting a similarity between llazore and rusica due to both involving a doll as a ritual object. Sokoli described this conflation as a merging of the two rituals. He explained:

*"In some villages around Korça, such as Dishnicë and Rrëmbec, during the Rusica ritual, women created*



a mud doll called 'nuskë'<sup>4</sup> and placed it on a table covered with a cloth, like how the deceased are covered. This 'nuskë' represented the 'Mother of the Sun' who had died. Around midday, the women would proceed to bury it outside the village, by the riverbank. While performing the burial ritual, they mourned the 'Mother of the Sun.' Upon concluding the ceremony, the women offered corn or boiled grain for its soul." (Sokoli 1981: 98)

The ritual was more accurately documented in 1944, providing a clearer description of the rusica ritual:

*"As women gather foods, they take them to four or five families where they cook them, and then they have lunch while singing and dancing together. After lunch, each group is led by a young girl dressed as a bride, who parades through the village. In honor of the sun god, they proceed outside the village, singing that they will come to cover the mother of the Sun. There, they create a pit with mud in the shape of a grave, each group making mud faces resembling people and covering them with mud in the open pits. The women then gather around the pit, mourning and saying, 'Mother, oh mother, the sun came and didn't find you.' After this, they distribute boiled grain next to the pit for the spirit of the mother of the Sun. Upon completion, the groups*

*reconvene, return to the village singing, and disperse to their homes."* (Visaret e Kombit 1944: 144–146)

Anthropologists have analyzed the rusica ritual as being associated with rainmaking rites. Among the Albanians in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>, for instance, the rainmaking ritual was performed exclusively by women. Women created a mud doll and buried it with funerary rites in a cultivated area (Budina 1993). After three days of visiting the grave and moistening it with water, they would unearth it and cast it into the river.

In the historical context outlined, there existed a concerted effort to curtail pagan religious practices that maintained ties to rituals and beliefs concerning the dead. These measures included the outright prohibition of pagan holidays, and cult objects associated with ancient agricultural rites and ancestral worship.

Furthermore, state authorities undertook initiatives such as constructing new cemeteries at locations separate from former religious shrines, as they were deemed risky due to their potential to perpetuate pagan beliefs regarding the afterlife and communication with deceased ancestors. This strategic placement aimed to sever the traditional link between burial sites and pagan religious practices, thereby advancing the goals of religious and



Fig. 5. The ritual of rusica (1961). Photo courtesy Fredi Mancini



Fig. 6. The ritual of rusica in the village of Polena, Korça (1998).  
Photo courtesy Fredi Mancì



Fig. 7. The ritual of rusica (2022). Photo by Dorina Arapi

cultural hegemony. Thus, the policies enacted during this period were designed to suppress elements of pagan religious heritage and to enforce conformity to dominant religious and cultural norms. This approach sought to diminish the influence of pagan beliefs on societal practices related to death and commemoration.

In this context, the burial ritual of the “mother of the sun,” symbolized by the terracotta doll, represents a pagan tradition associated with beliefs in the afterlife and chthonic cults. This ritual underscores the cultural and religious significance attached to ancestral worship and the connections between life and death in the community.

Additionally, the process of collectivization (1946–1967) within villages had a profound impact on the worldview of the inhabitants, influencing their relationships with the land, their way of life, and their traditional practices. This transformation was not merely economic or administrative but also deeply cultural, reshaping how individuals and communities perceived their identities, heritage, and spiritual connections to the natural world (Bardhoshi – Lelaj 2018; Hankollari 2023).

### Llazore and Rusica as Rituals of Agriculture

The rusica and llazore rituals relate to early agricultural and funerary cults, which often developed concurrently in the ancient world with the goal of ensuring grain availability.

Ethnographic evidence indicates that the ritual object, such as the doll and its burial, suggests a connection to agricultural cults (see also Spera 2002; Rivera 1988). This connection is further reinforced by the distribution of boiled wheat following the doll’s funeral.

In ancient Mediterranean cultures, terracotta dolls discovered in sanctuaries were dedicated to Demeter and her daughter Persephone as votive offerings. Demeter, revered as the deity of agriculture, fertility, and the natural cycles of life, held profound significance in ancient Mediterranean culture. The dolls, alongside other offerings, served as tangible symbols of devotion and were likely presented to seek blessings related to fertility and bountiful harvests (Larson 2001). The widespread presence of these terracotta dolls across various sanctuaries underscores the universal practice of making such offerings to Demeter or other agricultural deities. In ancient Athens, for instance, the mysteries of Demeter involved sowing grains immediately after burial, and the deceased were referred to as Demétreioi, associating them with Demeter (Buttitta 2006: 144).

This connection with the chthonic world, nature's fertility, and social prosperity dates to the dawn of humanity. In early agrarian societies, the concept of eternity was intimately linked to the idea of earth that bears fruit and serves as the dwelling place of the deceased. This symbolic connection established a relationship between agricultural cycles and human life cycles (Burkert 2013: 145). This practice highlights the integral role that agricultural cycles played in early societies and the symbolic intertwining of life, death, and renewal in these rituals.

Moreover, masked children in rituals embody the value and function of the dead (see Buttitta 2006: 177–181). The commonality between children and the dead lies in their liminality, existing at the boundary between life and death. In this liminal status, children, disguised as “beggars,” act as mediators between the two worlds, ensuring the future well-being of the community (Buttitta 2006: 172).

Oral and documented evidence also points to the ritual action of “kidnapping the bride,” a practice now lost in the *llazore* ritual but remembered by the bearers through verbal expressions or theatrical simulation (Neziri 2015: 124; Tirta 2004). These elements link the ritual to agricultural and prosperity cults, highlighting its significance in the community's cultural heritage.

The burial of the doll, symbolizing a journey to the underground world, the sharing of boiled wheat following the doll's funeral, and the abduction of the bride are essentially rituals that in the ancient world were synonymous with the cults of agriculture and fertility. In the spring rituals of *llazore* and *rusica*, elements and meanings are observed as remnants of early agricultural rituals, indicating a deep-seated connection to the cycles of nature and agricultural fertility.

### Some Final Remarks

In this paper I have tried to explore the historical context and status of *llazore* and *rusica* rituals in the village of Polena, demonstrating how their structure and significance have evolved while maintaining their essential role in the community's cultural heritage. Through an anthropological lens, the article has attempted to shed light on the resilience of these rituals and their adaptation in the face of modern challenges, emphasizing the community's efforts to uphold their cultural continuity.

A significant historical period that influenced and changed the community life, village rituals, and feasts in

Albania was the period of Socialism (1945–1990). During the socialist period the state implemented extensive measures to promote communist ideology and shape the New Socialist Man (Bardhoshi – Lelaj 2018). Various policies were implemented to transform cultural practices and economic structures. The state sought to undermine traditional customs, views, and folk traditions, particularly those linked to religion, and replace them with socialist ideals.

In 1946, the state initiated policies to reduce the number of religious feasts (Hulusi 1983: 265; Sadiku 2023: 56–72; Hankollari 2023). By 1967, these efforts had culminated in the complete elimination of the religious holiday calendar, which was replaced with socialist holidays. In 1967, Albania was declared an atheist state, leading to the banning of religious and pagan rituals, ceremonies, and holidays. The state sought to homogenize culture by eradicating traditional practices and promoting socialist values. This included the suppression of local customs, ceremonies, and religious observances, which were seen as obstacles to the formation of a unified socialist culture. During this time, the socialist state policies aimed at creating new ethnographic units on a unitary basis, which had a notable impact on local traditions, and disrupting traditional community structures. Such policies often involved detaching individuals from their religious faith and traditional kinship territories, leading to the desacralization, fading, and even oblivion of rituals (Tirta 1981). The diminished influence of religion, particularly after state-enforced atheism during the socialist period, has contributed to the fading of religious rituals.

Despite state efforts, many traditional practices persisted covertly or were adapted to fit the new socialist framework. While the measures significantly altered cultural practices and social norms, traditional customs and religious practices often persisted in adapted forms, highlighting the resilience of cultural identity in the face of ideological transformation, individuals and groups closely connected to their religious faith attempted to maintain and develop part of the rituals in secret. With the advent of the pluralist system in Albania in 1990, the community of Polena began to revive feasts and rituals.

The cultural homogeneity of the village is rooted in the endogenous cultural practices maintained by its residents. Due to its historical past and a desire to preserve the social fabric, religious, and cultural traditions, the community of Polena has upheld social homogeneity,

favoring social cohesion. The Polena community has consistently maintained a strong connection to religious values, mutual support, and local traditions.

Testa explains that the recent activation of festivities and rituals in societies can be understood as a process of 're-enchantment'. This phenomenon is seen as a response to the 'disenchantment' or loss of religiosity that began in late-modern, industrialized Western societies (Testa 2017: 25–26). Especially in former socialist countries, this process of re-enchantment is particularly significant due to the enforced secularization and cultural homogenization policies, which led to a loss, oblivion, and de-sacralization of traditional rituals and practices. Based on this conclusion, it can be said that this aspect has played a role in the reactivation of communities for the continuation of traditions and rituals.

Moreover, in the era of globalization, several factors have reconfigured feasts and rituals. Industrialization, improved living standards, the mass media, mass tourism, technology, new forms of experiencing reality, and mass culture have contributed to the "de-semiotization and de-sacralization" of the rituals, shifting their meanings in the popular ontological worldview (Dalipaj – Pistrick 2009: 133–148; Wałęciuk-Dejneka 2012: 103–109; Boissevain 2013). Urban developments, demographic displacement and decrease, emigration, and migration have influenced the praxis of these rituals, causing some of their former objects or meanings to fade or be discontinued.

In the case of Polena, there is a notable and constant drive within the community to preserve its local identity. This preservation effort does not stem from motivations related to tourism or local economic development but rather from a deep-rooted commitment to maintaining their cultural and religious heritage (see, for example, Testa 2017). The community preserves and inherits these rituals and traditions, because the community strongly believes in local and religious identity. The community of bearers actively documents and teaches traditional practices to younger generations, and preserves rituals.

Nowadays, the knowledge transmission of the ritual is done among individuals, teachers, older women and the women's association. The rituals, along with other rituals and feasts, have been preserved primarily due to the community's engagement, local homogeneity, and the social cohesion that the village has built over time. An important factor in preserving local traditions has been the enclosed

cultural aspect, influenced by the historical past that has significantly contributed to maintaining a homogeneous social fabric, and the church also plays an important role in preserving traditions, specifically religious ones.

Nowadays rituals do not play a role in framing agricultural cycles or devoting offerings to the divine. The disuse of the doll in Rusica ritual is an example that shows how rituals change, and how communities try to adapt them according to social and historical contexts. The doll, as a ritual object, played a crucial role in the entire ritual, representing perhaps its most symbolic action, but now it is not even preserved, faded from the memory of the bearers.

As Boissevain observed, the advent of industrialization introduced novel temporal frameworks to rural Europe, thus many traditional rituals that once played a crucial role in delineating agricultural phases lost their significance and function within communities (Boissevain 2013). The fading, preservation, or symbolic reactivation of certain rituals reflects new community needs and interpretations. Additionally, changes in the concept of time and worldview have influenced how rituals are perceived and practiced (Valeri 1979: 87–99). Another factor influencing the preservation and transformation of rituals is digital influence. The digital era has revolutionized the way rituals are shared and experienced, enabling participation beyond geographical boundaries while challenging traditional communal aspects. Digital platforms allow for the documentation, sharing, and dissemination of rituals, making them accessible to a wider audience. In this way, the bearers of the community view the digital world as a valuable tool for preserving and transmitting village traditions. Through social media, video recordings, and online communities, rituals that might otherwise fade into obscurity can find new life and relevance. Digital archives and virtual celebrations help maintain a connection to cultural heritage, especially for younger generations who are more integrated into the digital world.

Llazure and rusica rituals are markers of identity and continuity in the face of external influences and historical transformations. They unite communities by providing a totemic event that involves and celebrates the entire community, fostering cohesion and a sense of shared cultural and religious identity (Buttitta 2010: 208).

By analyzing these rituals, the study offered insights into how communities navigate and negotiate their traditions within changing historical contexts. These rituals

illustrate the dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation, showcasing how cultural practices evolve while

maintaining their core significance as symbols of collective identity and cohesion.

#### NOTES:

1. The author would like to express gratitude to the community of Polena village for their assistance during the fieldwork. In particular, the author extends thanks to Mariolla Kostandini, Sofika Filovani, Fredi Mancini and Jonida Sela for their help.
2. The text of the song contains words and phrases that do not make any sense in the Albanian language. These nonsensical elements are often included purely for the sake of creating rhyme within the verses, adding a playful or whimsical quality to the song, making it more engaging and memorable for those who sing and listen to it.

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