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## READING THE TRACES OF 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY RURALITY IN THE ALBANIAN RURAL LANDSCAPE

### **Abstract**

This article makes use of the notion of *modernist rural landscape* conceived as the result of imprints that modernity left within different countries' territories. As an example, the Albanian rural landscape is introduced as a palimpsest in which the country's 20<sup>th</sup> century history acted as a visible mark on the territory. Socialist processes and transformations in the countryside generated what could be identified as an extensive Albanian *modernist rural landscape*.

Considered a palimpsest in which the tangible and the intangible are strictly intertwined, the landscape should be tackled through interdisciplinary methodologies and biographical approaches. The authorship of the modernist rural landscape is often primarily associated with ideological policies and engineering schemes implemented by governments during specific historic periods. However, by applying a *biographical approach* towards the study of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Albanian rural landscape, emerges that the everyday authors are also the local communities and the people. The urbanization of the countryside was a clear and tangible goal of the communist regime that was reflected in the establishment of many new rural centres as part of the agricultural cooperatives or agricultural and livestock state farms. The aim was the reduction of socio-cultural differences between urban and rural contexts; a

modern living for the new socialist rurality that had to be realized also in the countryside through urban planning and architectural standardization.

In the late 1940s, among the first cooperatives, the livestock agricultural cooperative of Asim Zeneli was founded as the first of many others in the Drino Valley, Gjirokastra district, South Albania. What are the memories and narratives of those that experienced the socialist rural life in the cooperatives? What do they remember about the cooperative's establishment and the edification of the new rural centre of Asim Zeneli? What is left and still can be recognized in today's village urban texture? By adopting a biographical approach that considers the overlapping of local community narratives with historic published and unpublished sources, the last part of this article focuses on relocating and reconnecting memories of the inhabitants to the Asim Zeneli village's architectural and landscape legacy.

**Keywords:** Modernist Rural Landscape; Albanian Rural Landscape; Rurality; Landscape, Biography; Materializing Modernity.

### Abstrakt

Në qendër të këtij artikulli është nocioni i peizazhit modernist rural që lidhet me gjurmët e lëna nga moderniteti në territor. Rastit të peizazhit rural shqiptar i qasemi duke e konsideruar si një palimpsest duke pasur parasysh që historia shqiptare e shekullit të 20-të veproi si një shenjë e dukshme në territor. Proceset dhe transformimet socialiste në fshat gjeneruan atë që mund të identifikohet si një peizazh modernist rural i zgjeruar. I konsideruar si një palimpsest në të cilin e prekshmja dhe e paprekshmja janë të ndërthurura ngushtësisht, peizazhi duhet trajtuar nëpërmjet metodologjive ndërdisiplinore dhe qasjeve biografike. Autorësia e peizazhit modernist rural shpesh lidhet kryesisht me politikat ideologjike dhe skemat inxhinierike të zbatuara nga qeveritë gjatë periudhave historike të veçanta. Megjithatë, duke aplikuar një *qasje biografike* ndaj studimit të peizazhit rural shqiptar të shekullit të 20-të, del se autorët e përditshëm janë edhe komunitetet lokale dhe njerëzit.

Urbanizimi i fshatit ishte një synim i qartë dhe i prekshëm i regjimit komunist që u reflektua në ngritjen e shumë qendrave të reja rurale si pjesë e kooperativave bujqësore apo ndërmarrjeve bujqësore ose blegtorale shtetërore. Qëllimi ishte zvogëlimi i dallimeve socio-kulturore midis konteksteve urbane dhe rurale; një jetë moderne për një fshatarësi të re socialiste që duhej të realizohej edhe nëpërmjet urbanistikës dhe standardizimit arkitektonik. Ndër kooperativat e para që u themelua në fund të viteve '40 ishte kooperativa blegtorale dhe bujqësore e Asim Zenelit, e pasuar nga shumë të tjera në luginën e Drinos, në rrethin e Gjirokastrës, në Shqipërinë e Jugut.

Cilat janë kujtimet dhe rrëfimet e atyre që përjetuan jetën socialiste rurale në kooperativa? Çfarë kujtojnë ata nga krijimi i kooperativës dhe ndërtimi i qendrës rurale së re të Asim Zenelit? Çfarë ka mbetur dhe ende mund të njihet në teksturën e sotme urbane të fshatit? Nëpërmjet një qasjeje biografike që merr në konsideratë mbivendosjen e rrëfimeve të komunitetit lokal me burimet historike, pjesa e fundit e këtij artikulli fokusohet në zhvendosjen dhe rilidhjen e kujtimeve të banorëve në trashëgiminë arkitekturore dhe peizazheve të fshatit rural të Asim Zenelit.

**Fjalë kyçe:** peizazhi rural modernist; peizazhi rural shqiptar; ruraliteti; grafia e peizazhit; materializimi i modernitetit.

### **Intertwining between the tangible and the intangible**

In many European countries, *modernity* seems to have been regarded mainly as a state-based ideological and experimental project, providing an opportunity for imprinting the vision imposed by diverse ideologies on both urban and rural landscape, and new architectural ideas as well. Regardless of the nature of the political ideology, landscape in rural contexts underwent reshaping processes that reflected into tangible interventions and transformations, as well as intangible legacy. At different times and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many countries demonstrated all the difficulties involved in addressing and incorporating the memories, material

culture and societal evidence of those modernisation processes, and the remains they left.

These tangible traces of the past encompass cultural, societal, anthropological, and historical values and memories, still impacting people who live in those territories, experiencing the surrounding landscape (Pompejano 2021).

It is largely recognised that landscape is a combination of reciprocity and distinctness between human life and places (Kolen and Renes 2015, 21). It has the potential of absorbing people's life and, at the same time, shaping their life stories on diverse timescales that are imprinted by human existence. Ingold (2000, 189) says that landscape tells chronicles and stories of life and dwelling, and unfolds the past lives and times that played a role in its formation. Yet, it is a fact that 'today' life must be lived in an everchanging landscape. People are in the landscape and their act of remembering, forgetting, or anticipating has always been pivotal in the landscape formation process. In this sense, the landscape can be read as a sort of socio-cultural biography of a local community in a determined space and place. It is worthy mentioning the concept of *Landscape Biography* introduced by Samuels (1979) that affirmed that landscapes are accounts of the individuals who have occupied, worked, shaped, and lived them. He distinguishes among the two intertwined concepts of '*landscape of impression*' and '*landscape of expression*'. According to him, the former are representative of ideologies and space, and place representations, planning and design. Becoming the context in which landscape is formed, they result in the latter. Hence, the landscape is also an ethnographic and anthropological fact where stories and narratives are embodied in its physical elements. As Meschiari recalls, "it is not enough to understand what a landscape was, it is necessary to understand *what it can become*, what it 'asks' to become" (Meschiari 2012, 47). This means considering it a living system in which tangible and intangible elements are part of an on-going process. As Apaydin (2020) points out, memories and the material should not be engaged only with the past and with the only purpose of remembering. Substantially, landscape is a result of living contexts, thus under a *continuous process* of transformation that can be only managed; a complex system of

spaces, elements and natural and humans' phenomena in perpetual interactions (Antrop and Van Eetvelde, 2017).

Scholars' objective should be to try to understand how it came to be and how it may change in the future, leaving it open to present and future interpretation based on local community participation. This draws attention to the notion of *landscape as heritage* and consequently link it to the heritage-making processes and to the definition and implementation of conservation policies (ICOMOS IFLA 2017, 2; Scazzosi 2004). The many contributions given by research and studies that delve into historical processes, narratives, and memories can shed light on the multi-temporal dimension of landscape and, through analysis and interpretation, even turn difficult and/or vulnerable landscape into *resilient landscape* that embraces the present and future meanings, and changes without losing their past. Therefore, a *resilient landscape* means a sustainable complex system, that is "characterized by [the] capability to absorb adversity and continue to develop" (Holtorf 2018, 639). Embracing the ongoing change and stopping to think about legacy from the past as an inherited complete package would point the attention to the management of transformations based on the concepts of *sustainability* and *resilience*.

### **The Albanian rural landscape as a palimpsest**

Landscapes are *documents*, in which the cultures of societies offer evidence of a history of centuries. It is a complex *palimpsest* to which it is necessary to pay close attention. Particularly, the rural landscape features the signs of the transformations of peasant societies, changes in economic assets, and the progress of techniques. Studies on rural landscapes as a specific form of *cultural landscape* began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when historical geographers considered them as an "expression of a long history of land organisation by humans, recognizable as successive layers of adaptation according to changing social needs and technology" (Antrop and Van Eetvelde 2017, 45). In this sense, the Albanian rural landscape should also be read as a palimpsest of the country's history.

However, it is the more recent history, unfolding in its 20<sup>th</sup> century's events, that mainly shaped today's Albanian rural landscape.

Socialist modernization processes and transformations in the countryside, indeed generated what shall be identified as an extensive *modernist rural landscape*<sup>1</sup>. According to Breman, 'modernism' qualifies those works or facts that intentionally endeavour to express the state of modernity. The character and the peculiarities of those modernization processes based on a specific ideology shaped for more than forty-five years the Albanian rural landscape (Hall 1994, 71). Traces and evidence can still be read in the territory at the architectural, urban, and rural landscape scales, as well as in the narratives and memories unfolded by the people who experienced those transformations. The modernisation of the countryside "look[ed] forward rather than backward, expressing the condition of modernity rather than the conditions [...] of prior 'eras'" (Treib 2013, 7).

While observing the landscape when travelling through the Albanian territory, it is not difficult to recognise the traces left by the range of interventions that have been made during the dictatorship. The cultivated rural landscape of the main Albanian plains (Fig. 1), such as the Myzeqe Plain and the Korça Plain, are the result of the reclamation works and the rational use of water sources for irrigation purposes. The hills and halfway mountainous profiles are shaped in terraces that transformed the gentle slopes into bands of arable and cultivated land from North to South (Fig. 2) and mountain pastures into cultivated fields (Fig. 3).

Furthermore, by carefully observing the map of the geographic relief, it is possible to understand the extension of the vast water network that covers the territory. This water network is composed of pre-existing main rivers, waterways, and lakes to which new water basins and reservoirs were added during the communist regime. Following the reclamation of the marshy and saline lands, many works of arrangement, embankment, and

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<sup>1</sup> The adjective '*modernist*' is borrowed from Marshall Berman's book *All That's Solid Melts Into Air: The experience of Modernity* listed in the bibliography of this article.

the deviation of water courses were carried out together with impressive construction works aimed at implementing the irrigated surfaces (Fig. 4).



Fig. 1 View of the fields in the Korça Plain (Korça) from the SH79 national road.  
F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Fig. 2 View of the hilly rural landscape in Fajza, Has (Kukës). In the background, traces of the terracing interventions. F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Fig. 3 View of the Çajupi Plateau (Gjirokastër) that was transformed into first into pasture and then cultivated potato field. F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Fig. 4 View of a tertiary drainage canal leading into the bordering secondary canal near Darëzëzë e Re (Fier). F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Those engineering schemes envisaged a dense large-scale irrigation network composed of irrigation and drainage canals and ditches, and the construction of many dams and water reservoirs throughout Albania<sup>2</sup>. The collectivisation of the land and the subsequent mechanisation of the agricultural sector also led to the rapid urbanisation of the countryside. The latter covered a long span of time and was conceived as a complex process strictly linked to and coordinated with the socialist political ideology, the industrialisation processes, the strengthening of the socialist production relationships, the intensification of the agricultural production, the country's electrification campaign, the implementation of cities' urban masterplans and the socio-cultural regime's propaganda. The maxim "Të bëjmë fshatin si qytet!" (Let's make the village as a city!) reflected the socialist goal of reducing the differences between the urban and rural areas, converging into an effort to create a new socio-spatial settlement for a new society.

In this context, the development of new rural settlements constituted a pivotal element in the rural landscape: the minor ones gravitating to the major ones and the major ones in connection with the main cities. All these constitute evident signs in the very specific schemes and designs that the socialist modernisation of the country left in the present rural landscape. What about the intangible?

In addition to the tangible traces, the intangible ones constitute the other pivotal source for examining and understanding the traces of a *planned modernity* (Lelaj 2015, 46). The stories told by local communities, if collected and analysed through anthropological methods and analysis, can shed light on the relationship people had in shaping and experiencing the 'construction' of that landscape and how was experiencing it in the everyday rural life during the regime and after its collapse.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance the construction of the irrigation canals of Vau i Dejës-Trush in the Shkodra area, Berat-Ura e Kuçit in the Berat area, the "Naum Panxhi" canal in the Elbasan area and the Vjosë-Levan-Fier canal in the Fier area and, among the water reservoirs for irrigation purposes are worthy of mention the Thana and Kurjan in the Fier district.

## **An interdisciplinary approach to the study of Albanian 20<sup>th</sup>-century rurality**

This article is drawn from the wider project that was carried out by the author within the context of the EU-funded H2020 MSCA-IF research project “Materializing Modernity – Socialist and Post-socialist Rural Legacy in Contemporary Albania”, which aimed to explore 20<sup>th</sup>-century rurality and its legacy in contemporary Albania through the implementation of an interdisciplinary methodology spanning the disciplines of architectural preservation and landscape, architectural history, and ethnography. The research focussed on five representative macro rural areas geographically covering, from South to North Albania, the country’s territory. All the selected areas were strictly connected to some of the modernisation processes implemented by Enver Hoxha’s regime. The collection of data was carried out by the author through the development of archival research, the review of the main historic published sources, i.e., Albanian periodicals and publications, and fieldwork activities<sup>3</sup>. The latter involved a mixed methodology that made use of on-site GIS mapping, photographs, Go-along interviews, and semi-structured interviews with local communities.

In the following paragraphs, to briefly present the work carried out, the case of the establishment of the former agricultural and livestock cooperative of Asim Zeneli, Gjirokastra district, is introduced as an

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<sup>3</sup> MaMo participated in the Open Research Data Pilot (ORDP) in Horizon 2020 and addressed the relevant aspects of making data FAIR – findable, accessible, interoperable, and re-usable – by publishing outputs and datasets in the Materializing Modernity Community on Zenodo repository (See the link to the repository listed in the Bibliography). However, due to the qualitative nature of some data, the project guaranteed the definition of certain datasets to remain closed according to the principle “as open as possible, as closed as necessary”. For this reason, the audio and video files are stored and preserved at the Scientific Archive of Ethnography and Folklore at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies (IAKSA) in Tirana, Albania.

example of early urbanisation of the rural areas, and some inhabitants' memories collected during fieldwork are examined to briefly retrace the establishment of the cooperative and the construction of the village.

### **A new planned rurality: the case of the agricultural and livestock cooperative of Asim Zeneli**

Simultaneously with the end of 1945's agrarian reform and the implementation of the land collectivization process, in 1947 specific directives for the establishment of the *katundeve të rijë*, i.e., new rural villages, were issued by the Directorate of the Agrarian Reform of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (Pompejano 2021, 951). The urbanisation of the countryside aimed at populating the rural areas by establishing new rural and urban centres in strategic positions near mineral deposits, reclaimed swamps, arable and productive land and pastures (Hall 1986, 355). The edification of new villages and the grouping of existing ones in collective economies also aimed at reducing the differences between urban and rural areas with the propaganda objective of guaranteeing better living conditions for the peasantry. During a discussion at the meeting of the Central Council of the Albanian Labour Party held in January 1965, the dictator, Enver Hoxha, instructed that to facilitate the building of socialism in the countryside, the new villages had to be defined according to economic criteria and that the establishment of new rural centres had to be realised in slightly hilly terrains, dry and protected from floods so that to save hectares of arable land from construction sites (Hoxha 1978, 436-437), *de facto* paving the way to the intensification of the agricultural exploitation of plain lands and a further mechanization of the agricultural production.

In the case of the Drino Valley most of the new rural centres were established starting from the early 1950s as part of the state-farms of Valare, Arshi Lengo, Bulo, and Nepravishtë, except for the new villages of Asim Zeneli (Fig. 5) and Vrisera that formed the respective agricultural and livestock cooperatives (Londo 2022, 40). In these new rural centres, the directives of the new socialist urbanity were reflected and, according to the

determined agricultural economy, the residential zones of the villages were realised depending on the position of the economic and productive zones, usually consisting of stables, agricultural machinery and products warehouses, pastures, arable land, etc. The residential zone was composed of dwellings – mainly one-storey single family houses in the cooperatives and multi-storey housing in the state-farms – administrative and socio-cultural buildings, and basic facilities. The expansion of the residential zone over time was regulated by the so-called *vija e verdhë*, (yellow line), drafted in the masterplans conceived by the Ministry of Construction, accordingly to the foreseen population growth.



Fig. 5 View of the rural village of Asim Zeneli and its surrounding landscape from Jerma hill. F. Pompejano. 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

### **Towards a promised land: memories from the establishment of the cooperative and the building of a new socialist rural village**

The livestock and agricultural cooperative of Asim Zeneli<sup>4</sup> was formally established in the year 1947 as the first of that type in the country (Haxhiu 1963, 6-7) based on the joint collective economy of a group of shepherds coming from Kurvelesh's villages of Progonat, Golem, Lekdush and Rexhin to the nationalised summer and winter pastures in the mountains facing the museum city of Gjirokastra:

“[...] this village [Asim Zeneli – ndr] was formed by three villages from the Labëria region; people who came mainly from the three villages of Progonat, Golem and Lekdush. [...] With the implementation of the agrarian reform, hence with the nationalization of all properties [...] state property took precedence and private property was reduced. In 1967 the collectivization ended in all of Albania [...] property became collective. [...]. People who came out of the war, people who were commanders in wartime became leaders in the country's districts [...], because they fought to come to power, fought to liberate it and necessarily had the moral, civic, and political rights to lead us. One of them was the brother of our Hero of the People, Asim Zeneli, whom the village was named after. This brother of Asim Zeneli was the chairman of the Executive Committee [Executive Committee of the Party of Labour of Albania in the Gjirokastra district - ndr], Sherif Zeneli, he gathered all in Progonat. He called those he knew better and said: “Tomorrow the collective will be established and some of you will leave the village of Progonat [...] your place cannot provide for you. [...] you will create the cooperative and will move to Gjirokastra. There, I will settle you [...]”, and twenty-seven families,

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<sup>4</sup> Asim Zeneli (3 May 1916 – 2 July 1943) was an Albanian partisan during World War II. He died in 1943 during the battle against Italian troops in Mezhgoran, near the citadel of Pmet. Posthumously, he was awarded the highest honour awarded by the communist regime, the Hero of the People medal.

representatives of twenty-seven families, [...] gathered there and agreed on the principle that: an agricultural cooperative will be created, it will be named after Asim Zeneli, and it will be in [the surrounding area of – ndr] Gjirokastra. Some of them didn't know where it was [the location for the cooperative – ndr]. However, they agreed in principle. [...] and from there in 1949 the final relocation took place.”<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the migratory character of its collective economy, during the first years in the aftermath of the cooperative's establishment, it became necessary to build a new rural centre near the winter pastures located in the hilly landscape of Pesjak, in front of the historic citadel of Gjirokastra. An old shepherd remembers: “In 1947 we joined the cooperative and my grandfather delivered 350 sheep to the cooperative [...], and by order of Enver Hoxha a decree was issued giving Çajupi and Pesjak as pastures [summer and winter pastures - ndr]. Now, we have had these [pastures – ndr] around Pesjak, from Leven and up to the border with Suhë were ours [pastures].”<sup>6</sup>

During the years 1947-1950 the first provisional constructions were realized with local materials to provide shelters called *vllaqiko*<sup>7</sup> (Haxhiu, 1963, 8). Later in 1951, thanks to the increase of the state cooperative funds, it was possible to start the construction of the first masonry one-storey single family houses in the village. The first masterplan prepared by the Ministry of Construction foresaw fifty houses to be completed within the year 1956 and other socio-cultural constructions to be built over time, which would constitute the centre of the village (Haxhiu, 1963, 8). The two main parallel roads are clearly visible in the handmade sketch of the

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<sup>5</sup> MaMo Project, 2021. Interview 04\_AU-04\_06a-210618, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 18 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tirana (Albania).

<sup>6</sup> MaMo Project, 2021. Interview 04\_AU-04\_12a-210626, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 26 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tirana (Albania).

<sup>7</sup> See also note 5.

village's masterplan provided by Haxhiu in his 1963's article and still well maintained today, as well as many of the first houses built in the 1950s (Fig. 6). On the contrary, slight variations can be observed with respect to what is foreseen in the sketched masterplan as regards the location of the socio-cultural, administrative, and public service buildings that constitutes the centre of the residential zone and the prosecution towards north of one of the main roads.



Fig. 6 Superimposition of the Google orthophoto (2021) with the handmade graphic sketch of the village masterplan published by Haxhiu in his 1963's article. Note the construction and permanence of the two parallel main roads and of many of the first houses built in the 1950s. F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

All building activity was carried out by a construction team composed of master builders (Fig. 7) that came from the nearby Zagoria region:

“Our old man was a master builder [...] Those in the village were looking for a master builder to lead construction works in the village, to build the village [...] and our old man came there with a couple of other friends who were taken from there [Zagoria – ndr] and came to the village, here in Asim Zeneli. There was nothing here. Our village has been empty. Some small buildings were created, then... then began the construction of houses in the new village of Asim Zeneli. [...] in 1951, he [his father - ndr] came here

from Doshnica. We, as a family, have been scattered. In fact, only dad came here as it was a craftsman and a master builder.”<sup>8</sup>

Each residential lot was around 300 m<sup>2</sup> and the houses were built in stone masonry, mortar and a wooden roof covered first in stone slabs, and later, in tiles. The one-storey single family house had a simple scheme with two rooms, a corridor, and a small cooking annex.

“[...] the topographers of that time came [...], the engineers did the masterplan and did the houses’ projects, the streets were 8 meters wide, the houses would be in a straight line [...] - there was no exception - and the yard’s entrance in front of the house was 6 meters [from the door of the house – ndr]. [...] this was the basic criterion [...] and the first three houses were made according to this model, hence with a square plan with two rooms and one, let’s say, kitchen, and a veranda in the front [...]. Then it [the model – ndr] changed and became a model called “Elbasan”, that is, it became a square house, 4x4 meters inside, and composed accordingly to number of members forming the family [...]”<sup>9</sup>.

In the same years the construction of the first elementary school of the village also started, along with a small basic medical facility, and in the year 1958 the *shtëpia e kulturës* (the house of culture) was ultimately built. Socio-cultural constructions, administrative buildings, health-care buildings, and facilities were centrally positioned and given more importance within the village urbanized texture. With the construction activity in the new socialist village proceeding and the cooperative production and economy increasing, in the early 1960s, three existing villages, i.e., Krinë, Saraqinishtë and Treneshishtë, joined the cooperative thus forming the Kooperativa Bujqësore i Bashkuar “Asim Zeneli”. The cooperative continued to grow

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<sup>8</sup> MaMo Project, 2021. Interview 04\_AU-04\_03a-210615, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 15 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tirana (Albania).

<sup>9</sup> See also note 5.

over the following years by including the existing villages of Suhë and Stegopul, and finally in the 1969 the village of Lazarat.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 7 The village of Asim Zeneli under construction. Historic photograph preserved by an inhabitant. It was once exhibited as part of the permanent exhibition of the Village Museum, i.e., Muzeu i Fshatit. F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

“[...] problems arose after Lazarat joined us [...] they were a very large cooperative, but they were without any kind of assets, they did not offer anything in the cooperative except workforce, and necessarily, from 200/220/250 lek per working day it [the salary – ndr] dropped to 80 lek per working day. [...] Seeing this, they started to correct something, but it was too late. Around 1986-1987 they broke away, 3 or 4 years before the system collapsed [...] and then Asim Zeneli remained as it was at the beginning with the three

<sup>10</sup> AQSh i RSh, Fund: 490, Folder 469, Year: 1970, pp. 1-109; AQSh I RSh, Fund: 490, Folder 316, Year: 1969, pp. 1-99.

villages above [Krinë, Saraqinishtë and Treneshishtë – ndr] [...] until the beginning of the year 1992.”<sup>11</sup>

The end of Enver Hoxha’s regime found the agricultural cooperative of Asim Zeneli discussing about how to distribute the cooperative assets and land. On July 26, 1992, the territory of the former cooperative was converted into the municipal territory of Antigone<sup>12</sup> which included, besides Asim Zeneli, the villages of Krinë, Saraqinishtë, Treneshishtë and the near village of Arshi Lengo.

## Conclusion

The village of Asim Zeneli represents an early example of the attempt to urbanize rural areas in socialist Albania and relocate population. The narratives referred by the inhabitants are convergent with some details already stated in 1963 by Haxhiu concerning the relocation of the Kurvelesh people to the new site decided by the Party for the foundation of the new rural village. Asim Zeneli village also represents an interesting case study concerning the planned relocation of population from one geographical region to another. In this specific case, it is also interesting to note the evolution of the agricultural and livestock economy of the cooperative, from a practice of transhumant sheep flocks breeding, to one of semi-transhumance aimed at intensifying the breeding activity and the

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<sup>11</sup> MaMo Project, 2021. Interview 04\_AU-04\_04a-210615, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 15 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tërana (Albania).

<sup>12</sup> Antigone is a former municipality in the Gjirokastrë district, southern Albania. Following the 2015 local government reform, it became a subdivision of the municipality Gjirokastrë (See Law 115, July 31, 2014 “Për ndarjen administrativo-territoriale të njërive të qeverisjes vendore në Republikën e Shqipërisë”). The municipality was named after the ancient city of Antigonea which archaeological remains are in the Jerma hill once used as winter pasture.

exploitation of the new pastures obtained following the collectivization of the lands.

From the interviews carried out during the fieldwork in Asim Zeneli village, it emerged that recollections concerning the cooperative establishment and the construction of the new village were handed down not only within the family context, but also through regime's propaganda tools, such as the *muzeu i fshatit*, (the museum of the village). In this sense, the building of memories attached to the establishment of the cooperative and the construction of the new village was also affected by the debris of the regime's propaganda. In general, this is what emerged from the narratives collected especially in those villages that, like the agricultural and livestock cooperative of Asim Zeneli, were among the so-called “fshatrat e përkëdhelur nga sistemi”, i.e., villages for which the system had a sort of preference, albeit on that was always manipulated for socialist propaganda purposes<sup>13</sup>.

Narratives attached to the construction of the villages often underline the change in the rural life of the families brought about the introduction of modern facilities and services, like the electrification of the area in the 1960s and the construction of new architectural types in the village, such as the socio-cultural buildings with the community's activities that were carried out, the educational and primary health services, the basic retail shops, and the importance of maintaining and curating the common public spaces. Memories connected to the rural landscape are instead strictly linked to the breeding activity of the shepherds and constitute probably the most genuine and interesting legacy to document and pass on. The paths and the still standing *stan*<sup>14</sup> and *lerë*<sup>15</sup> constitute evidence of the transhumance activity in the summer pastures and a few shepherds from

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<sup>13</sup> See note 11 and note 5.

<sup>14</sup> The *stan* is a place located in the pastures where temporary huts for sheep and shepherds are built during the summer transhumance.

<sup>15</sup> The *lerë* is a medium-large water pothole that collects rainwater for flocks watering. During the regime, some *lerë* were built in concrete, whilst the traditional ones had the cavity lined with stones.

Asim Zeneli still use them in the summer, keeping active the breeding activity in a semi-transhumance regime (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 The stan of the Subash pasture is located at the end of the route which has its starting point near the fountain located on the Fusha e Çajupit and it is still used by local shepherds. F. Pompejano, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Finally, people reported that women of the village had a strong textile tradition of producing carpets and shepherds' clothing, although not for commercial purposes<sup>16</sup>. Inhabitants still remember the presence of the typical *tezgjah* (loom), in each house of the village at that time and an old woman reported on the entire wool manufacturing process that it is now lost.

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<sup>16</sup> MaMo Project, 2021. Interview 04\_AU-04\_01d-210624, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 24 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tiranë (Albania).  
MaMo Project, 2021. 04\_AU-04\_02a-210615, Asim Zeneli (Gjirokastra), 15 June 2021. Arkivi Shkencor i Etnografisë dhe Folklorit, Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe i Studimit të Artit (IAKSA), Tiranë (Albania).

To briefly conclude, the narratives analysed and cited in this article, interlaced with the historic published and unpublished sources and with the on-site mapping and analysis of material evidence, reveal how landscapes are accounts of the individuals who have occupied, worked, shaped, and still inhabit them. Asim Zeneli village exemplifies the two intertwined concepts of '*landscape of impression*' and '*landscape of expression*' (Samuel 1979). The village was founded to reflect a specific ideology into a place predetermined by the Party, early materialising the socialist agricultural economy, urban planning, and architectural design. The new constructed village with its masterplan and architecture, and its collectivised pastures became the context in which a modernist rural landscape was shaped. By remembering, forgetting, or anticipating it, Asim Zeneli's inhabitants continue to experience and process the inherited landscape, imprinting their *biography* in a determined space and place that continues to evolve.

### **Evidence and memories from all periods count equally**

The recent history of Albania does not end with the collapse of the regime in the early 1990s. In the aftermath of the dictatorship's end, the country entered a deep *transformation phase* (Bardhoshi 2011, 117). At the territorial level, this transformation phase encountered the imprint of the spread of the so-called *informal areas* that affected the rural and the urban landscape as well. There is no Albanian city, village or public space that was not been affected by unplanned and spontaneous construction. Yet, these *informal areas* constitute new *human landscapes*, layers in a multi-temporal landscape.

Nevertheless, the phenomena of migration towards the major cities and foreign countries, begun in the early 1990s and still ongoing, continue to constitute the real scourge of the Albanian countryside. An uncontrollable and incessant migratory flow severely contributed to the abandonment of the rural settlements and, consequently, to the abandonment of the reclaimed and cultivable rural areas. It seems that if the urbanization and modernization of the countryside was a very specific plan in Socialist

Albania, the de-ruralisation is an evident condition that originates from failed agricultural reforms and socio-cultural policies.

The present Albanian rural landscape is clearly imbued with different memories and personal experiences of the people who experienced the landscape both under the harsh dictatorship and its modernization processes, and during the transformation towards democracy. Every landscape evolves with the society that inhabits it and is the mirror of its historical and social events, economic and political problems, and of cultural contrasts and nuances.

By adopting a *biographical approach* towards the study of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Albanian rural landscape, one comes to understand that the everyday authors were, and still are, the local community and the people. It was through the hands of the peasantry that modernist rural landscape in Albania was shaped; it is through the people and local communities that Albania continues to materialise its history in its landscape. It is an *authorship* that might be difficult to accept since it is strictly connected to the visions and schemes imposed by the dictatorship and to the difficult transformation period. But providing that the meaning of a landscape or a monument should be in its future and not in its past (Holtorf 2015, 174), purging from the peasantries and people's authorship, the ideological and political influences would reveal an authorship from below that shaped the modernist rural landscape with its daily actions and experiences.

It is a legacy that should not be ignored by today's society. Preserving the traces of the modernist rural landscape in the Albanian territory should be considered as a critical exercise of knowledge which, on the one hand, faces the dimension of a difficult recent history and, on the other, extends into a possible future.

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