

Pagan Symbols in Albanian "Xhubleta"

Agim BIDO (Tirana)

In the folk Albanian culture there is an element of great interest - the women traditional costume with "Xhubleta". It is a stiff, bell-shaped gown, with a waving hem-line, which is attached by two broad strips on the shoulders. This costume has no parallel today in other territories of the Balkans and the South-eastern European countries. With its extraordinary appearance it had long ago attracted the scholar's attention, like Nopsca, Wilke, Garašanin, Haberlandt and so on. The first and full description for this costume is made by the Hungarian literary man Daniel Kordinez in 1750, when he visited the Albanians of the tribe Kelmend, who were immigrated in Srem. Nowadays the costume with "Xhubleta" is rarely used, because it is not much practical, is a heavy woolen skirt and its complete weight is about 16 kg, but it is used in wedding parties and in important public events. This characteristic dress reflects a very ancient type of clothing which survived in several regions of Northern Albania, as well as in territories inhabited by Albanians in Kosovo and Montenegro.

About the genesis of this costume, most scholars have accepted the ancient Mediterranean origin and Craetan-Mycenian prototype for Albanian women traditional costume with "Xhubleta". Likewise the dress of a figurine found in Klicevac (Vojvodina Region) belonging to the Bronze Age, second millennium B.C., is acceptable as the more complete predecessor of Albanian "Xhubleta". Their resemblances testifies genetic links between them, and the comparison becomes more convincing of other analogous figurines found on the shores of the Mediterranean. There is no doubt, however, that the costume with "Xhubleta" survived for centuries within the Illyrian civilization, was integrated in it and was handed down from century to century to the Albanian culture of today, and only to it. But how does the "Xhubleta" adapt to and bring for these civilizations nowadays?

In the confrontation of Albanian costume with "Xhubleta" to the ancient Mediterranean culture and its historical development of today we can say that ornamentation was treated less than other components. The predecessor of the "Xhubleta", the figurine of Klicevac, coincides historically and geographically with the forming and consolidation period of the Illyrian ethnos on the Western shores of the Balkans. Except type, the "Xhubleta" brings today a very rich and interesting ornamentation. Until the beginning of the 20th century the costume with "Xhubleta" contained numerous decorations of an original style in which, besides the black and the white, other colours like orange, scarlet, violet, red, etc. were used. Nowadays the colours are decreased, but not the ornaments. The artistic

structure of this costume stands out among the various Albanian folk costumes for women. This distinction is noticed even in the typological structure, hence it constitutes an original type. Besides this, the artistic structure too (the form and traits, the dark colours and archaic decorations) plays an important role, as an element of ethnical specificity. The comparison between the costume with "Xhubleta", which is still being used today, and the figurine of Klicevac is noticed both in the typological and artistic structure, because decorations of the breast, waist and in the bands at the bottom of costumes have been incised in this figurine. These kinds of decorations are also to be found in the costume with Xhubleta of our days.

The costume with broad pleats going wide at the bottom is of special interest from the artistic viewpoint because it lends grace to the mountain Albanian woman. Another specific element of this costume in our days is dark colouring which makes decorations less conspicuous. On the other hand we find applied a broad stock of floral, geometric, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and space ornaments. From the stylistic viewpoint the ornamentation of "Xhubleta" contains archaic structures, where the ornament is presented as the linear interpretation of various symbols. A characteristic of the decorative system is the stylistic unity of the decorations of all the component parts, something which constitutes original artistic phenomena in the Albanian folk costumes for women.

As we said, except type, the "Xhubleta" brings very rich and interesting ornaments. One stratification of symbolic ornaments stands out as the principal pagan symbols very widely spread with Illyrians and other civilizations like Hellenes and Thracians. Such are the cults of the sun, of the moon, of eagle and serpent, or the matriarchal and the fertility cult. The Illyrians honoured the earth and the forefathers of the tribe.

These symbolic ornaments are applied in two technical stratifications: first, one fund with geometrical ornaments realized by weaving, and second, one other more realistic group realized by embroidery, fine beads and metallic applications. The first fund, of geometrical ornaments, can be considered as the more ancient stratification, applied by embroidery in some elements of costume like aprons, and a part of the "Xhubleta". Usually some centres of the aprons are woven and some parts of the Xhubleta are realized by knitting. The ornaments in these parts of the costume are geometrical; there stand out the triangle and the rhombus, as symbols of the fertility cult.

The second group of ornaments, realized by embroidery, include basic symbols like the sun, the moon, the star, serpent, eagle, etc. The circle, with a lot of variations, and the spiral are very much applied in aprons, in the horizontal strips behind the "Xhubleta" etc. "The sun is everywhere", old women will say. Nowadays it is possible to find in this costume neither the figure of the cross, nor the figures of the crescent with a star. It looks like as an interlacement of Christian and

Islamic symbols, but it is not. Edith Durham, at the beginning of the 20th century, had visited Northern Albania and she had seen these symbols in the embellishment of the women's folk dress. She had noted: «When I asked them why take a Turkish symbol, they answered me, we had held always it. This is not Turkish, we are good Catholics. The half-moon and the star are very old - they said. And I have seen this combination nowadays. The old women simply said "The moon harmonizes with the star"». It is the archaic pagan stratum of ornaments of Xhubleta, that accepts these symbols.

The eagle is presented in two forms: one in the very archaic form, and the other in the form of a stabilised aesthetic Byzantine symbol well-known in the Middle Ages. "Eagle is eagle, it needs space" the Albanian women said when this ornament is the greatest of the others and is applied in the central position of the costume, as in the woolen belts etc. Very interesting is also the motif of serpent applied horizontally in the strips of "Xhubleta", often in two or three lines. "The eagle is good" the old women said. As sign of the forefather cult and defender of the home, the serpent is often interlaced, with the sun motif, both in the double spiral form. It is called "seha" like the "s" letter form and is very frequently used.

As reminiscences of the earth cult, there are very curious magic ornaments, various insect figures or humble-bees and so on, which damage the earth. "Don't touch them, because they bite" the women said for each of them.

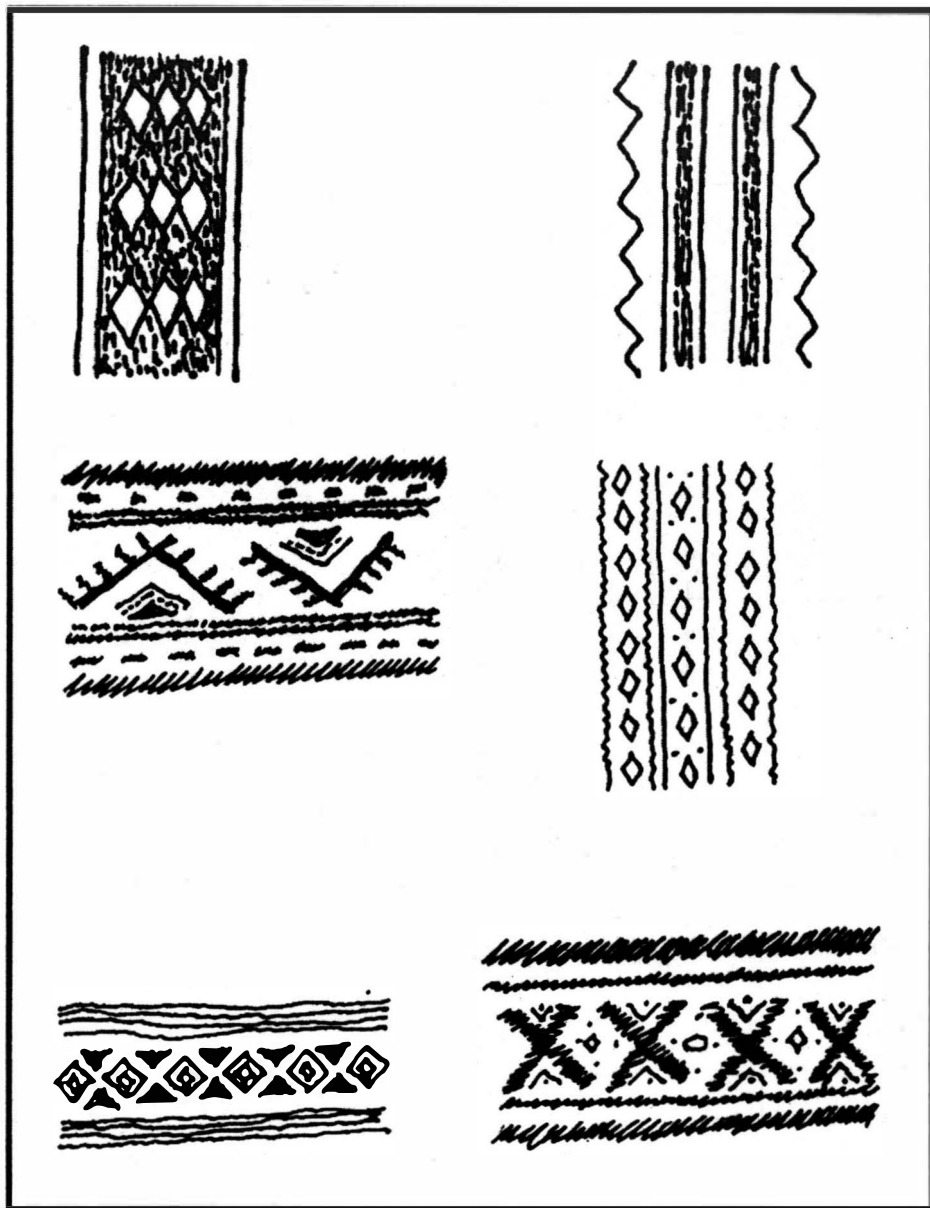
All these ornaments, especially the principal pagan symbols in the ornamentation of Albanian "Xhubleta", reflect one intuition of space and time for ancient Balkanic ethnic groups, including the Illyrian-Albanian continuity.

Agim Bido
Instituti i Kultures Popullore
RR. "Kont Urani" nr. 3, Tirana
Albania

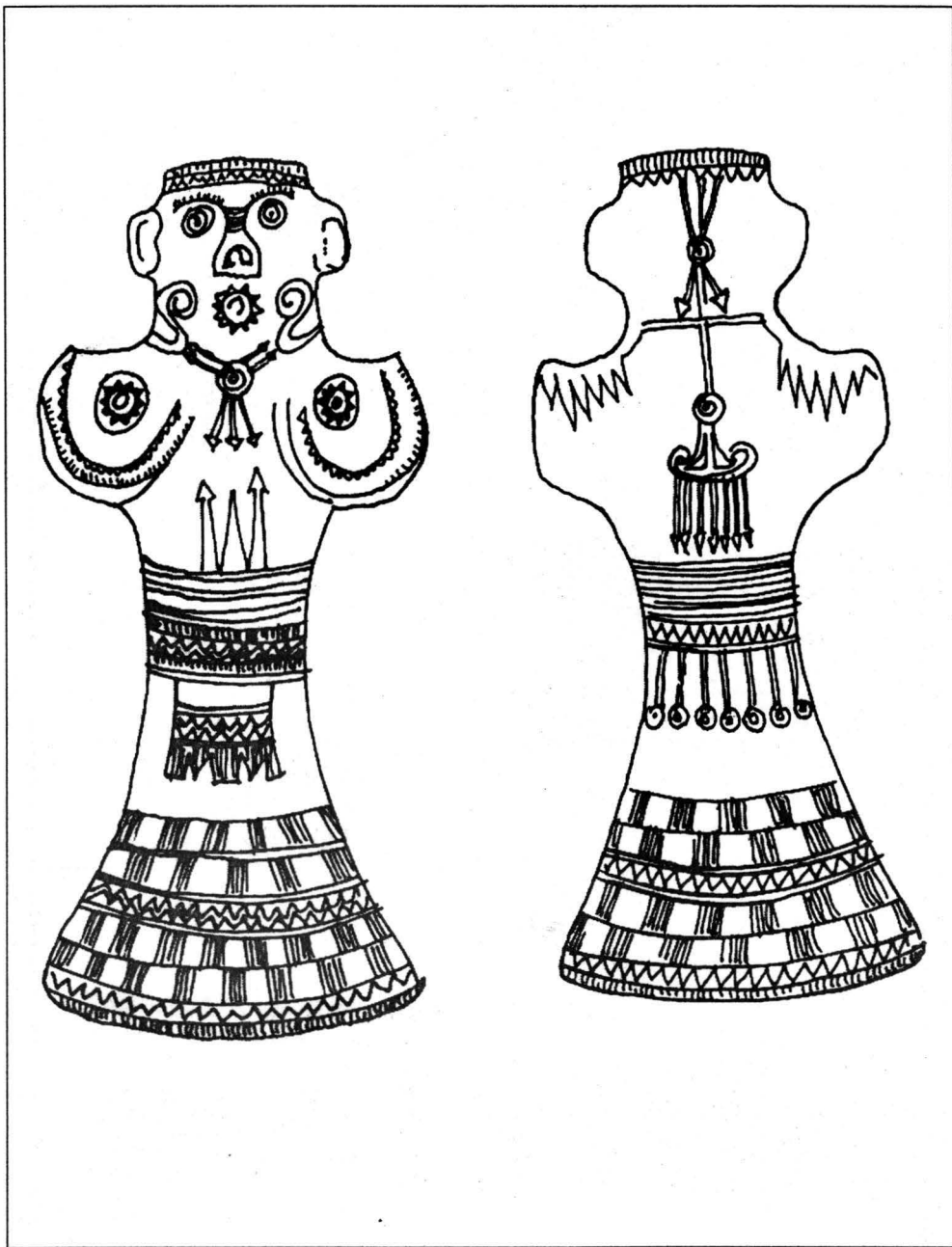
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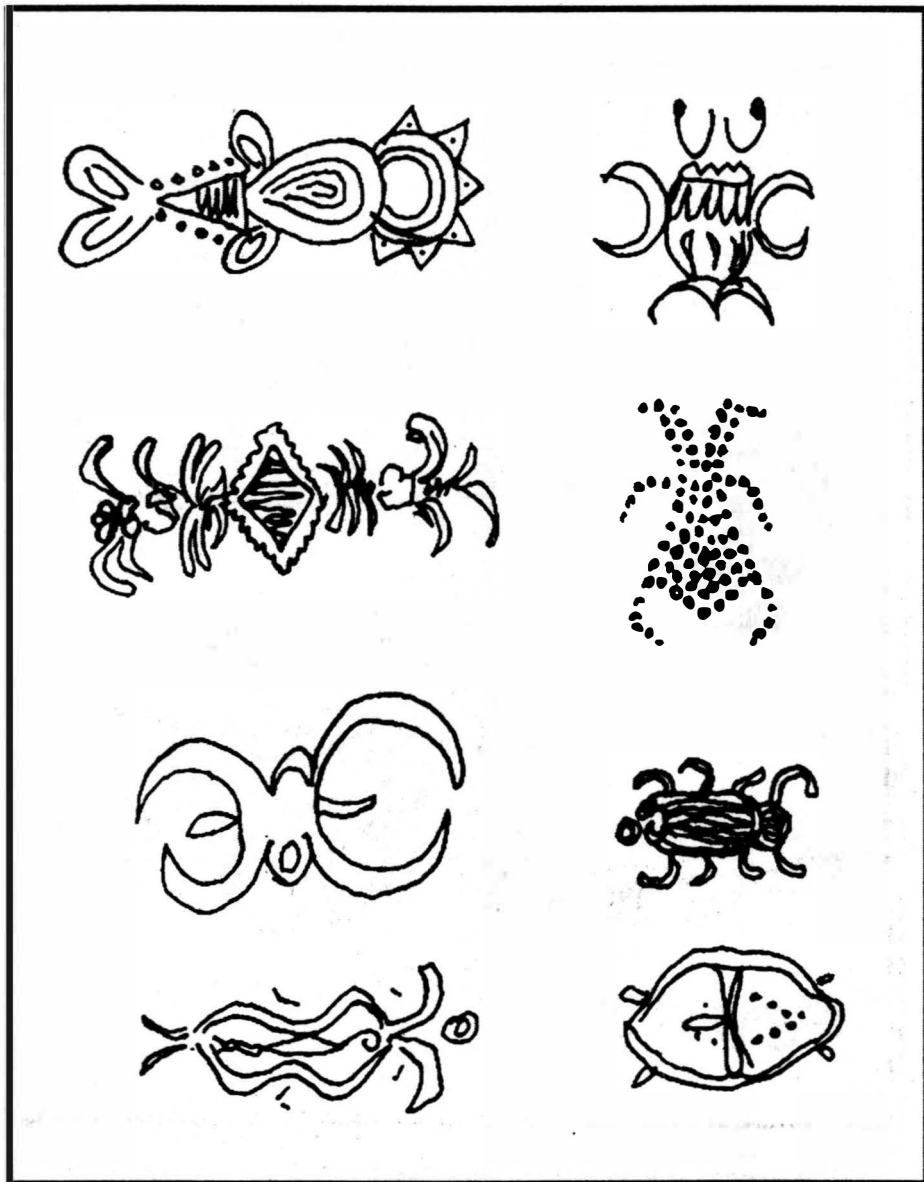
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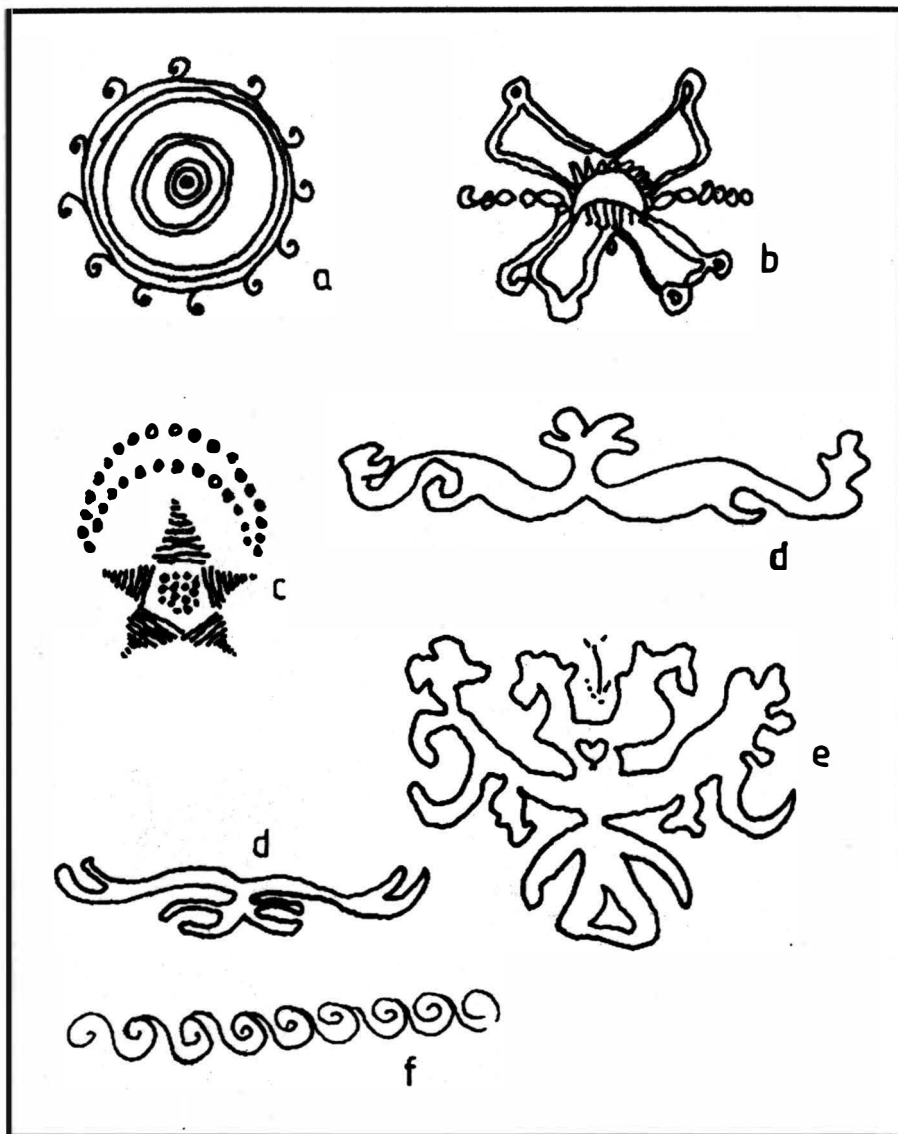
Geometrical motifs.



Anterior and posterior view of the Klicevac figurine, belonging to the Bronze Age, Second Millenium B.C.



Various insects and humble-bee figures.



a. Sun motif; b. Moon motif; c. Moon and star motif; d. Serpent motif;
 e. Eagle motif; f. Sun and serpent motif (double spiral).



A women group by Vermosh village (Northern Albania, Shkodër, 1986) during a folk event wearing in costume with xhubleta.



In Ragam village (Northern Albania, 1987).



Ornamentation in posterior parts of Albanian
"Xhubleta" and belt (Northern Albania, 1986).



Ornamentation the anterior aprons of
the Albanian costume with Xhubleta (Northern Albania, 1985).