diversity

MDPI

Article

The Importance of Being Diverse: The Idiosyncratic Ethnobotany of the Reka Albanian Diaspora in North Macedonia

Rinor Berisha [1], Renata Sõukand [2,*], Anely Nedelcheva [3] and Andrea Pieroni [4,5]

[1] PEN—Peer Educators Network, Rr. "Behije Dashi" Kati I, Prishtinë 10000, Kosovo
[2] Department of Environmental Sciences, Informatics and Statistics, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 30172 Venezia, Italy
[3] Department of Organic Chemistry and Pharmacognosy, Faculty of Chemistry and Pharmacy, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", 1 J. Baurchier Blvd, 1164 Sofia, Bulgaria
[4] University of Gastronomic Sciences, 12042 Pollenzo, Italy
[5] Department of Medical Analysis, Tishk International University, Erbil 44001, Iraq
* Correspondence: renata.soukand@unive.it

Abstract: Cultural diversity and biodiversity are strongly intertwined through the ways in which local human communities have understood, categorized, perceived, and used nature and species for centuries. Folk nomenclature and uses of wild plants in particular are strongly linked to specific ethno-diversities and have often been considered as cultural markers. In the current study, through thirty-one interviews with elderly villagers, the ethnobotany of five Albanian villages in North Macedonia was recorded, as these villages are inhabited by descendants of Reka Albanians, whose peculiar dialect and customs have been the subject in the past of some linguistic, historical, and ethnographic works. A few folk names and utilizations of commonly used species (such as *Rumex*, *Urtica*, *Tilia*, *Crocus*, and *Hypericum* spp.), as well as the traditional customs of collecting tree cambium during the spring and ritually adorning home doors with *Cornus mas* and *Salix* spp. branches on St. George's Day, partially overlap Macedonian/Bulgarian folklore, and, to a minor extent, data previously collected in NE Albania and South Kosovo. Nevertheless, some archaic uses (such as the consumption of *Crocus* corms) remain very idiosyncratic. While the origin of the Reka Albanians and the exact historical reasons for their peculiar ethnobotany practices cannot be exactly established, the data showed that this cultural group living at the cultural edge between the Albanian and South Balkan Slavic realms has maintained its diversity until the present. Its uniqueness should be valorized and celebrated.

Keywords: ethnobotany; Albanians; Reka; North Macedonia; Slavic folklore

check for updates

Citation: Berisha, R.; Sõukand, R.; Nedelcheva, A.; Pieroni, A. The Importance of Being Diverse: The Idiosyncratic Ethnobotany of the Reka Albanian Diaspora in North Macedonia. *Diversity* **2022**, *14*, 936. https://doi.org/10.3390/d14110936

Academic Editors: Michael Wink and Ben-Erik Van Wyk

Received: 8 October 2022
Accepted: 29 October 2022
Published: 1 November 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural approaches are central to ethnobiology for better understanding of how local nature knowledge and perceptions change across diverse cultural areas, and several recent works, especially those emerging from non-Western scientific arenas, have helped in better understanding cross-cultural emic conceptualizations underpinning human attitudes towards biodiversity (see for example [1–10]). The Balkans in SE Europe represent a crucial hotspot of both biological and cultural diversities [11,12] and the region not only boasts one of the first ethnobiological studies ever conducted in the world (more than one century ago [13]), but also, during the two past decades, has hosted an impressive resurgence of studies focusing on folklore regarding plant biodiversity, especially among minority groups [12,14] and references therein. Albanian traditional ecological knowledge and practices (TEK), and in particular its wild plant-centered portion, have been the subject of various studies [15–20], and it has been for our research group always particularly inspiring to study the ethnobotany of communities living at the Slavic-Albanian cultural edges in

Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Within these communities a special case study is represented by Reka Albanians, i.e., the Albanian population living in the Reka Valley (nowadays in the NW area of North Macedonia), who have been the focus of historical, linguistic, and ethnographic interest for many decades [21–24], especially because of their specific dialect and folk customs, and the fact that this has possibly been one of the poorest and most disadvantaged areas in the Albanian mountains.

One decade ago we investigated the diversity of plant uses of the remaining inhabitants of this small territory, comparing the data with an ethnographic account written one century earlier [25].

In the current study, our aim was to further investigate the ethnobotany of Reka (Valley) Albanians, focusing on five very small North Macedonian villages, whose Albanian inhabitants are descendants of Reka Albanians who migrated there during the past few centuries, most likely responding to unsustainable demographic pressure in their small valley [26].

The specific research objectives of the current study were:

1. to document the folk knowledge of wild plants in the Reka Albanian villages of North Macedonia;
2. to compare the resulting data with those of neighboring areas, both Albanian and Slavic;
3. to compare the data with the available historical data.

2. Materials and Methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation, were conducted in August 2022 with elderly community members (n = 34) of five Albanian mountain villages located in North Macedonia (Figure 1).

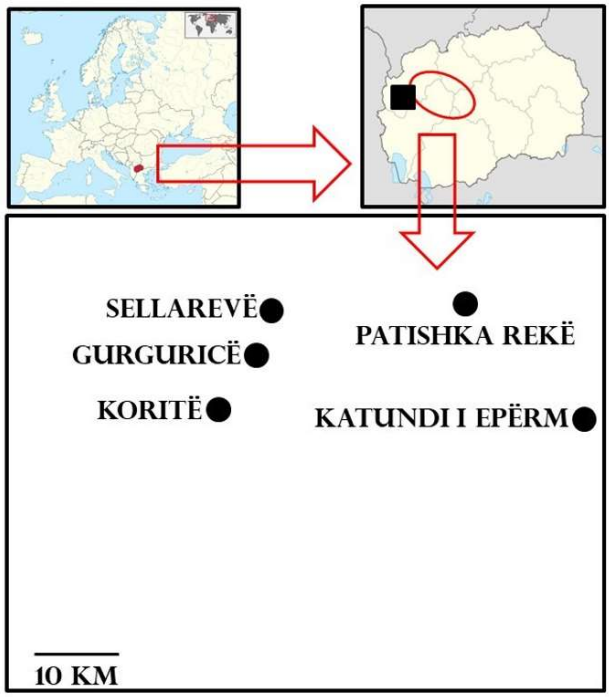

Figure 1. Map showing the location of the five Albanian study villages within North Macedonia (area circled in red) and the Reka Valley (black square), from where the villagers originated.

The visited villages consisted of the following:

- Koritë (in the Macedonian language: Корито), 41°48′21″ north, 21°01′36″ east, 995 m.a.s.l., approximately 10 permanent inhabitants;

- Gurguricë (in the Macedonian language: Гургурница), 41°50′45″ north, 21°06′10″ east, 1107 m.a.s.l., approximately 500 permanent inhabitants (Figure 2);
- Sallarevë (in the Macedonian language: Седларево), 41°52′59″north, 21°07′39″ east, 1281 m.a.s.l., approximately 300 permanent inhabitants;
- Patishka Rekë (in the Macedonian language: Патишка Река), 41°48′00″ north, 21°19′01″ east, 1243 m.a.s.l., approximately 200 inhabitants;
- Katundi i Epërm (in the Macedonian language: Горно Јаболчиште), 41°43′21″ north, 21°29′ 09″ east, 1332 m.a.s.l., approximately 3000 inhabitants.

Figure 2. The village of Gurguricë (Photo: A. Pieroni).

All the villages are mountainous and isolated from main city centers and they are among the most elevated permanent settlements of the entire Balkans. The study area belongs to the Euro-Siberian vegetation region with mountain pastures and forests dominated mainly by conifers and beech trees.

According to historical sources [21] and our informants, the population of the villages was and still is entirely Albanian, and locals settled in the present villages during the past few centuries after migrating from the Reka Valley. Today the five villages are entirely Sunni Muslim, whereas until the end of WWII all the villages were mixed, being home to both Orthodox Christian Albanians and Sunni Muslim Albanians. During the past several decades, the Orthodox population has relocated to nearby towns and villages and adapted to the Orthodox Macedonian majority, nowadays being essentially "Macedonicized".

The villages were inhabited a few decades ago by thousands of locals, who have now mostly migrated to Germany, Italy, and the nearby towns of Gostivar, Tetovo, Skopje, and Veles. All Albanian inhabitants of the villages are—to different degrees depending on age and gender—bilingual in Macedonian.

The traditional economy of the villages was based on pastoralism (sheep breeding, Figure 3) and subsistence mountain horticulture, with rye, maize, and potatoes as staples during the past century. Gathering wild fruits (blueberry), herbs, and porcini mushrooms for sale to city markets was in recent decades, and partially still is, an important economic activity, while today remittances from relatives living abroad represent the main source of income.

Figure 3. The ancient shepherding- and rye-driven settlement of Gurguricë, before locals relocated one century ago to the new village, approximately 1 km eastwards (Photo: A. Pieroni).

The main traditional daily staple has been, at least during the past three centuries, maize "crumbled" polenta (boiled in salted water) with homemade strained yogurt (*bagertar me kos*, Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Bagertar me kos* (maize crumbles served with homemade strained yogurt, photo: A. Pieroni).

Study participants (n = 31; 12 females and 19 males) were selected among elderly community members (over the age of 60) and asked about traditional uses of wild plants

(in use until a few decades ago or still in use today), especially in the domains of domestic food, medicine, and rituals.

Specifically, information concerning the local name(s) of each quoted taxon, the plant part(s) used, in-depth details about its manipulation/preparation and folk use(s) was collected. Interviews were conducted in Albanian by the first and last authors. Prior informed consent was verbally obtained prior to the interviews and the researchers adhered to the ethical guidelines of the International Society of Ethnobiology [27]. During the interviews, informants were always asked to show the quoted plants or, at a minimum, to describe them. The large majority of the botanical specimens were collected during a previous ethnobotanical field study conducted in the Reka Valley [25]; the identification of the wild plant species quoted in this study was therefore assessed linking the specimens collected one decade ago to the same local folk (Reka Albanian) phytonyms. A few taxa that were not mentioned in the previous studies have been identified based upon the folk plant names and the plant descriptions provided by the study participants. Botanical nomenclature was standardized using the World Flora Online database [28] and family assignments followed the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group IV system [29].

A historical comparison of the gathered data was conducted using the account about Reka daily life written by Bajazid Doda around one century ago [22], as well as sources describing the ethnobotanies of surrounding communities [17–20,30,31] and Macedonian/Bulgarian folklore [32–34].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Wild Plants Used by Reka Albanians in North Macedonia

Table 1 shows the wild plants quoted by the study participants, listed in alphabetical order; the study participants quoted 54 species belonging to 35 genera and 29 families with one unidentified ethno-taxon.

Table 1. Recorded wild plant uses in the study sites.

Botanical Taxon or Taxa and Botanical Family	Local Name(s)	Used Parts	Local Preparations/Administration and Uses	Frequency of Quotation
***Acer pseudoplatanus* L., Sapindaceae**	Panja	Cambium mixed with sap (*greçka*)	In the spring, a tree trunk was carved, the (jelly) material that came out was collected with a knife (within minutes) and consumed on the spot (esp. in the past)	Low
***Anacamptis morio* (L.) R.M.Bateman, Pridgeon & M.W.Chase and *Dactylorhiza sambucina* (L.) Soó, Orchidaceae**	**Kalçiçuçe**, Salep	Tubers	First dried and then decocted (in the past)	Medium
Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (L.) Spreng., Ericaceae	Majeska, Uvin çaj	Aerial parts	Tea (toothache; kidney problems)	Medium
Asplenium trichomanes L., Aspleniaceae	Fier guri	Leaves	Tea (bronchitis)	Low
***Bryonia alba* L., Cucurbitaceae**	**Rrepa** per të nxon	Roots	A small piece added to milk as a yogurt starter (esp. in the past)	Low
Carlina acanthifolia All., Asteraceae	Ferra magari	Flower receptacles	Snack	Low
***Carpinus betulus and C. orientalis* Mill., Betulaceae**	**Gaberica**, Mledha	Cambium mixed with sap (*greçka*)	In the spring, a tree trunk was carved, the (jelly) material that came out was collected with a knife (within minutes) and consumed on the spot (esp. in the past)	Medium
Centaurium erythraea Rafn, Gentianaceae	Lule idhët	Flowering aerial parts	Tea (digestive and anti-cough)	Middle
***Chenopodium album* L., Amaranthaceae**	**Labota e egër**	Leaves	Filling for pies (*petka*)	Low
Chenopodium bonus-henricus L., Amaranthaceae	Spinaqi e egër	Leaves	Filling for pies (*petka*)	Low
***Cornus mas* L., Cornaceae**	Thana, Thona	Flowering branches and fruits	Branches: hung on house doors as a good omen on St. George's Day (esp. in the past); fruits: consumed raw, dried and then decocted (*ashaf*)	High
Corylus avellana L., Betulaceae	Laithi	Kernels	Eaten raw	Low
Crataegus monogyna Jacq., Rosaceae	Morriz, Rrushi I egër	Flowers and fruits	Flowers: tea; fruits: snack	Low
***Crocus cvijici* Košanin, *Crocus scardicus* Košanin, and *C. veluchensis* Herb., Iridaceae**	**Kaçunka**	Flowers and corms	Snack, esp. consumed on St. George's Day (in the past)	High
Epilobium angustifolium L., Onagraceae	Lule shelçe	Leaves	Tea ("good for the prostate")	Low
***Fagus sylvatica* L., Fagaceae**	Ahu	Cambium mixed with sap (*greçka*)	In the spring, a tree trunk was carved, the (jelly) material that came out was collected with a knife (within minutes) and consumed on the spot (esp. in the past)	High
***Fragaria vesca* L., Rosaceae**	**Çiuska**, Drethza, Drevdhza, **Piuska**	Fruits	Eaten raw	Medium

Table 1. *Cont.*

Botanical Taxon or Taxa and Botanical Family	Local Name(s)	Used Parts	Local Preparations/Administration and Uses	Frequency of Quotation
Fraxinus excelsior L., Oleaceae	Frasher	Branches	Macerated in water and given to chickens and hens to strengthen them (in the past)	Medium
***Galanthus nivalis* L., Amaryllidaceae**	**Shkolka**	Flowers	Snack (esp. in the past)	Medium
***Gentiana lutea* L., Gentianaceae**	**Shtara**	Roots	Macerated in *raki* (digestive); chewed to treat toothaches	Low
Hylotelephium telephium (L.) H.Ohba, Crassulaceae	Lugen e bushit	Leaves	Topically applied (after removing outer part) for treating skin diseases	Low
***Hypericum perforatum* L., Hypericaceae**	Baisht shperdit, **Kantarion**	Flowering aerial parts	Tea; oleolite, externally applied for skin problems	Medium
Juglans regia L., Juglandaceae (SD)	Arra	Leaves; kernels	Leaves: tea, externally applied to hair to strengthen it; kernels: eaten raw, home-made *baklava*	Low
Juniperus communis L., Cupressaceae	Dëllënia	Galbules	Tea (digestive); *raki* (in the past); used for seasoning meat before drying it	Medium
Malus sylvestris (L.) Mill., Rosaceae	Molla e egër	Fruits	Fermented into home-made vinegar, dried and then decocted (*ashaf*), iioo jams	High
Mentha longifolia (L.) Huds., Lamiaceae	Naxhas	Leaves	Seasoning	Low
Origanum vulgare L. Lamiaceae	Çaj livadhi, Çaj mali, Çaj i zi	Flowering aerial parts	Tea	Medium
Plantago major L., Plantaginaceae	Baisht	Leaves	Externally applied for skin problems	Low
***Primula veris* L., Primulaceae**	**Garicviçi**	Flowers	Tea (cough)	Medium
***Primula vulgaris* Huds., Primulaceae**	**Patleska**	Flowers	Snack	Medium
Prunus avium L., Rosaceae	Shurshi e egër	Fruits	Eaten raw, jams	Low
Prunus cerasifera Ehrh., Rosaceae	Kumulla e egër, Kumulla e shkurtur	Fruits	Eaten raw, compote, jams; dried and then decocted (*ashaf*); *raki* (esp. in the past)	High
Prunus spinosa L., Rosaceae	Kulumbri	Fruits	Syrup	Low
Pyrus spinosa Forssk., Rosaceae	Dardhë te egër	Fruits	Dried and then decoction (*ashaf*), *raki* (in the past), jams	Medium
Quercus spp., Fagaceae	Dushk	Leaves	Tea for gargling (toothache)	Low
Rosa canina L., Rosaceae	Kaça, Koça	Pseudofruits	Tea	Medium
***Rubus fruticosus* L. agg., Rosaceae**	Ferra te egër, Manaferra, Mjedra e zezë, **Moza**	Fruits	Eaten raw; jams	Medium
Rubus idaeus L., Rosaceae	Mjedra, Mjedra e kuqë	Fruits	Eaten raw	Medium

Table 1. *Cont.*

Botanical Taxon or Taxa and Botanical Family	Local Name(s)	Used Parts	Local Preparations/Administration and Uses	Frequency of Quotation
***Rumex acetosella* L., Polygonaceae**	**Gisilica, Kiselica**	Leaves	Filling for pies (*petka*)	High
Rumex patientia L.,Polygonaceae	Lepçeta	Leaves	Filling for pies (*petka*)	High
***Salix alba* L., Salicaceae**	Shelçe	Flowering branches	Hung on house doors as a good omen on St. George's Day (esp. in the past)	High
Sambucus nigra L., Adoxaceae	Stank, Stang	Flowers and fruits	Flowers: tea; fruits: snack	Low
Sedum album L. Crassulaceae	Lule arushe	Leaves	Yogurt starter (in the past)	Low
Sempervivum macedonicum Praeger, Crassulaceae	Lule gishti	Leaf juice	Topically applied to treat earaches, toothaches, and snake bites	High
Sideritis scardica Griseb., Lamiaceae	Çaj bieshka	Flowering aerial parts	Tea	High
Thymus serpyllum L. (s.l.), Lamiaceae	Lis	Aerial parts	Used for rubbing wood utensils used with dairy products (in the past)	Low
***Tilia platyphyllos* Scop., Malvaceae**	**Çaj lipe**	Flowers	Tea	Medium
***Urtica dioica* L., Urticaceae**	**Kapriva**	Young aerial parts	Filling for pies (*petka*); cooked with maize flour (*mil mçenke*) and buttermilk (*dhallët*)	High
***Vaccinium myrtillus* L., Ericaceae**	**Boronika, Baruk**, Shurshia e malit	Fruits	Eaten raw, juice, jams	High
***Verbascum thapsus* L., Scrophulariaceae**	**Bubujak**	Aerial parts	Ichthyo-toxic: macerated in water and spread in the river to catch fish (in the past)	Low
Unidentified	Gazbeth	Roots	Snack (in the past)	Medium

SD: semi-domesticated; frequency of quotation—high: quoted by 40–100% of the study participants, medium: quoted by 10–39% of the study participants, low: quoted by one or two participants only. Species and folk plant names that overlap Macedonian/Bulgarian ones (according to the literature, see Methods section) are reported in bold.

3.2. The Idosyncratic Elements of Reka Albanian Ethnobotany

Macedonian/Bulgarian folk names, as recorded in the ethnobotanical and folkloric literature reported in the Methods section, are marked in bold.

Moreover, Figure 5 shows the overlap of the wild food and herbal plants recorded in the current study with those previously documented in the Reka Valley proper (NW of North Macedonia), NE Albania, and South Kosovo, among both Albanians and the Gorani people (Figure 6) [17–20,30,31].

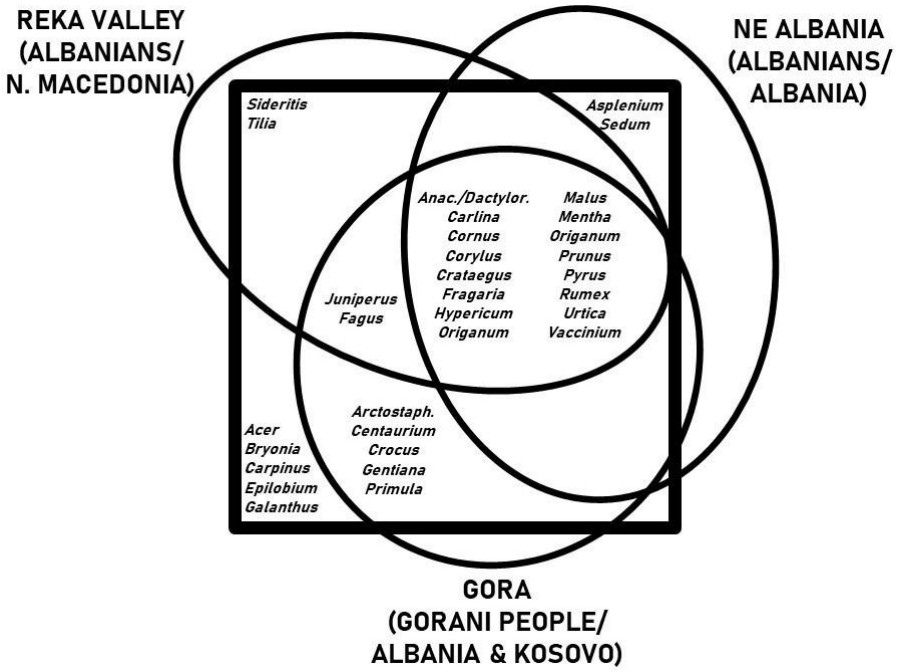

Figure 5. Venn diagram showing the overlap of the wild food and herbal plant genera documented in the present study (within the bold square) with those recorded in surrounding areas, both among Albanians and the Slavic Gorani people (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Map of the compared areas (NE Albania—inhabited by Albanians; Reka valley, North Macedonia—inhibited by Reka Albanians; Gora, Albania and Kosovo—inhabited by the Gorani people) [17–20,30,31].

Figure 5 presents an interesting variety of commonly used wild plants, but also especially a remarkable overlap between the collected data and that of Gorani people. Most Macedonian/Bulgarian folk names and uses involve three groups of wild plants:

- wild vegetables (such as *Rumex acetosella* and *Urtica dioica*) named in Slavic and used mainly as fillings for pies;
- (a few) wild fruit and herbal folk names, such as those of *Fragaria*, *Vaccinium*, *Gentian*, *Tilia*, and *Hypericum* spp.;
- wild plants (i.e., *Salix alba* [Figure 7] and *Cornus mas* branches) that, even if named in Albanian, were used until a few decades ago for St. George's Day rituals as a good omen, as normally done by Bulgarians [32–34], and some NE Albanians as well [19].

Figure 7. *Salix alba* in a courtyard in Sallarevë (Photo: A. Pieroni).

All three points certainly suggest that Reka Albanians had, at a minimum, important exchanges with their South Balkan Slavic neighbors.

Moreover, according to Bulgarian folklore [32–34], St. George's Day occupies a central place in the annual holiday cycle, since it marks the beginning of the summer half of the year and the start of the new farming season. There are several basic elements in the rituals occurring on this occasion: fresh spring plants (greens); sheep farming and rites related to the flock and shepherds—a lamb is normally slaughtered as a ritual sacrifice; and festive meals and general family fun (music, singing, dancing). In this context, fresh blooming plant branches are crucial elements of the celebration and are associated with health and fertility rituals.

More problematic is tracing the possible origins of the foraging and consumption of:

- raw underground plant organs (and flowers) of diverse *Crocus* spp. and of *Galathus nivalis* bulbs, which were named in Slavic and whose uses as snacks consumed on the spot is completely unknown in European folklore—with the closest current similar uses for *Crocus* spp. being found in Kurdistan [35] and references therein;
- cambium (mixed with sap) of wild trees (*Acer*, *Carpinus*, and *Fagus* spp.) collected during the spring and consumed on the spot (Figure 8)—a custom that is, again, wholly unknown in Southern Europe.

Figure 8. Male study participants from Gurgumicë simulating how the trunk of *Carpinus* was carved to obtain cambium mixed with sap (Photo: R. Berisha).

Less unusual, but still very rare, are the recorded archaic uses of *Bryonia alba* and *Sedum album* as yogurt starters—while the former plant is widely used in rituals as a good omen in NE Albania and among Goranis [22], the latter was recorded for a similar past use in NE Albania [31].

3.3. Possible Reasons for the Reka Albanian Ethnobotanical Diversity

Reka Albanians are well-known in Albanological studies for having always been considered peculiar, because of their proud geographical isolation, their idiosyncratic Albanian dialect [26], and their very late Islamization (which gained momentum only in the late 18th/early 19th century, possibly enhanced by the cessation of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate of Peč/Peja in 1766 by Turkish Sultan Mustafa III, which left isolated communities without their parishes [36]).

Moreover, throughout history, Reka Albanians have been the subject of several, often ideology- and nationalism-driven, hypotheses formulated by historians and ethnographers, mainly concerning their "Albanicized" Slavic or "Slavicized" Albanian origins [21,22].

However, the unusual ethnobotanical data we documented with the remarkable occurrence of diverse Slavic elements (which have never been previously recorded in Albanian customs and folklore) certainly needs some explanatory models.

First of all, the idiosyncratic Slavic ethnobotanical names and uses involve three groups of plants. The first one includes wild plants that are or were generally gathered and transformed in the kitchen or ritually by women (*Rumex*, *Urtica*, and the ritual wild plants associated with St. George's Day). The important ritual meaning of *Salix* in Gorani folklore

has been recorded by our research group [20] as a cultural marker, and the ritual uses of *Salix* are prominent among Bulgarians and South Serbs [24–32,37]. The second group of plants includes the flowers of *Crocus* and *Primula* spp. and underground organs of *Crocus* and *Galanthus* spp. that were gathered and consumed on the spot, especially by young male community members—this custom is unknown in Europe and only known in parts of the Middle East. The third group of idiosyncratic plant uses includes tree species, whose cambia, mixed with sap, were gathered in forested environments and consumed on the spot by men/shepherds (*Acer*, *Fagus*, *Carpinus* spp.)—this foraging and food customs are unknown to our knowledge in Southern Europe. The sap of various other trees (mainly *Betula* and *Acer*, but also *Fagus* and *Carpinus* spp.) were and still are collected instead in North Europe [38–40]. However, in our study site this material and collection/consumption modality was very different: as reported by all male informants, they used to carve the trunk of these trees with a knife (see Figure 7) and collect (within minutes) a whitish "jelly" material (resembling a local dairy product vaguely corresponding to yogurt buttermilk that is locally called *greçka*, from which the name of this plant material was derived)— a mix of sap and cambium—that was consumed directly on the spot straight from knife to mouth. Remarkably, there is no specific term for cambium in East Slavic languages in the food context, whereas, for example, in Estonian that emic term existed (*mähk*), and within the territory of present-day Estonia the cambium of 12 taxa (including *Acer* and *Betula* spp.) was historically consumed [38]; it is important to note that the collection of tree cambium was prohibited as it injured trees, yet young shepherds and children still ate it until quite recently [38].

Returning to the three groups of idiosyncratic plant uses we recorded, it is somewhat easy to explain the majority of "female" plant lore, while the "male" component is more problematic. Reka Albanian communities were historically patrilocal and women could be married/brought into Orthodox homes of the village from surrounding Orthodox South Balkan Slavic villages (both Mijak Macedonians and possibly also former Orthodox Gorani people in the past several centuries). Additionally, the phenomenon of crypto-Orthodox Albanians, known as *Laramans*, in past centuries in NE Albania and North Macedonia is well-known [41] and could have been much more widespread than generally assumed, making intermarriages with Orthodox women not only tolerated, but desired.

The resilience of "male" archaic plant customs needs further investigation. Male community members of our study site were accustomed to building their social networks in Alpine pastures while shepherding and also possibly while visiting markets (in the summer in Prizren and in the winter in Gostivar, according to our study participants). Through these social contacts with male neighbors they may have acquired this TEK, which, however, never "entered" into their homes. Nevertheless, the consumption of tree cambium and especially *Crocus* corms has never been recorded as common among South Balkan populations. The consumption of *Crocus* corms is well known in the Middle East, while *Crocus* fruits were reported as a past archaic snack in the Mediterranean as well [42]. The widespread reporting of the consumption of raw *Crocus* corms and the fact that this plant use is still (sporadically) utilized only in the Near East could possibly support the hypothesis that Reka Albanians are linked to Armenian Paulician heretics, which have often been postulated to be one of the possible ancestors of the Bogomils (Christian Orthodox heretics in the Medieval Balkans [43]), and in turn possibly linked to Gorani ethnogenesis too [44]; however, this hypothesis would need to be consolidated by more robust and rigorous historical data on Reka Albanians, which are still largely missing, according to our knowledge. In addition, it is worth mentioning that these possible links among Paulicians, Gorani people, and Reka Albanians could be supported by the fact that we recorded a similar food use of *Crocus* corms during a field study among the Gorani communities in NE Albania one decade ago, when we erroneously identified the folk generic *kaçunka* as *Orchis* spp. [20].

4. Conclusions

Documentation of wild plant uses in marginal and peripheral communities—regardless of whether the marginality is geographical, ethnic, religious, or social—is essential for understanding how customs linked to plants and people have changed over time and across space. The current study shows a remarkable divergent ethnobotanical diversity at the edge of the Albanian cultural area, where influences from neighboring South Balkan cultures may have been stronger, as well as the archaic remains of peculiar plant uses, whose exact origin cannot be conclusively explained.

Reka Albanian plant heritage, however, may need further attention from scholars and stakeholders for a number of reasons:

- for a better analysis of the historical exchanges and contacts between Albanian and Gorani people/Macedonians/Bulgarians in NE Albania, South Kosovo, and NW North Macedonia;
- for allowing local communities to promote their local wild plants in the gastronomic, herbal, and eco-tourist sectors;
- for inspiring possible local entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at valorizing specific wild plant uses.

Further studies along Albanian/South Balkan Slavic cultural borders are needed to better assess the degree of past exchanges between these two "worlds" and to evaluate the historical stratifications, i.e., possible ancient contributions to present-day local Reka cultural diversity, well beyond the borders of the circumscribed Albanian and Slavic cultures.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.P.; methodology, data collection, A.P. and R.B.; formal analysis, A.P., R.S. and A.N.; writing—original draft preparation, A.P.; writing—review and editing, R.S., A.N. and R.B.; supervision, A.P.; funding acquisition, A.P. and R.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The field study was funded by the University of Gastronomic Sciences, Italy; editing was covered by the Department of Environmental Sciences, Informatics and Statistics, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 30172 Venezia, Italy.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study by the University of Gastronomic Sciences, Italy.

Data Availability Statement: Data supporting the reported results are included in the manuscript text.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to the local communities, who shared their TEK with the first and last authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Hassan, M.; Haq, S.M.; Ahmad, R.; Majeed, M.; Sahito, H.A.; Shirani, M.; Mubeen, I.; Aziz, M.A.; Pieroni, A.; Bussmann, R.W.; et al. Traditional Use of Wild and Domestic Fauna among Different Ethnic Groups in the Western Himalayas—A Cross Cultural Analysis. *Animals* **2022**, *12*, 2276. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
2. Favi, G.A.; Dassou, G.H.; Djidohokpin, D.; Ouachinou, G.M.N.A.S.; Kpétikou, C.G.; Gbedolo, E.; Anagonou, A.; Hidalgo-Triana, N.; Adomou, A.C. The resource availability hypothesis (RAH) and cross-cultural patterns: Which one explains West African *Cochlospermum* species' uses in Benin? *J. Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.* **2022**, *18*, 56. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
3. Yao, R.; Heinrich, M.; Wei, J.; Xiao, P. Cross-Cultural Ethnobotanical Assembly as a New Tool for Understanding Medicinal and Culinary Values–The Genus Lycium as A Case Study. *Front. Pharmacol.* **2021**, *12*, 708518. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
4. Benítez, G.; El-Gharbaoui, A.; Redouan, F.Z.; González-Tejero, M.; Molero-Mesa, J.; Merzouki, A. Cross-cultural and historical traceability of ethnomedicinal Asteraceae. Eastern Morocco and Eastern Andalusia: Two sides of a sea in 20 centuries of history. *S. Afr. J. Bot.* **2021**, *139*, 478–493. [CrossRef]
5. Srithi, K.; Trisonthi, C.; Inta, A.; Balslev, H. Cross-cultural Comparison of Medicinal Plants Used to Treat Infections in Northern Thailand. *Econ. Bot.* **2019**, *73*, 86–95. [CrossRef]
6. Rahman, Q.; Nadeem, M.S.; Umair, M.; Altaf, M.; Ni, J.; Abbasi, A.M.; Jameel, M.A.; Pieroni, A.; Hamed, M.H.; Ashraf, S.; et al. Medicinal waterbirds in the traditional healthcare system: An assessment of biodiversity–cultural linkages in Eastern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *J. Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.* **2022**, *18*, 57. [CrossRef]

7. Paniagua-Zambrana, N.; Cámara-Leret, R.; Bussmann, R.W.; Macía, M.J. Understanding transmission of traditional knowledge across north-western South America: A cross-cultural study in palms (Arecaceae). *Bot. J. Linn. Soc.* **2016**, *182*, 480–504. [CrossRef]
8. Pieroni, A.; Prakofjewa, J.; Sõukand, R. The trauma of no-choice: Wild food ethnobotany in Yaghnobi and Tajik villages, Varzob Valley, Tajikistan. *Genet. Res. Crop. Evol.* **2021**, *68*, 3399–3411.
9. Khan, S.; Hussain, W.; Shah, S.S.; Hussain, H.; Altyar, A.E.; Ashour, M.L.; Pieroni, A. Overcoming Tribal Boundaries: The Biocultural Heritage of Foraging and Cooking Wild Vegetables among Four Pathan Groups in the Gadoon Valley, NW Pakistan. *Biology* **2021**, *10*, 537. [CrossRef]
10. Mullalija, B.; Mustafa, N.; Hajdari, A.; Quave, C.L.; Pieroni, A. Ethnobotany of rural and urban Albanians and Serbs in the Anadrini region, Kosovo. *Genet. Res. Crop. Evol.* **2021**, *68*, 1825–1848. [CrossRef]
11. Griffiths, H.I.; Kryštufek, B.; Reed, J.M. (Eds.) *Balkan Biodiversity. Pattern and Process in the European Hotspot*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2004.
12. Pieroni, A.; Quave, C.L. (Eds.) *Ethnobotany and Biocultural Diversities in the Balkans. Perspectives on Sustainable Rural Development and Reconciliation*; Springer: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
13. Glück, L. Skizzen aus der Volksmedicin und dem medicinischen Aberglauben in Bosnien und der Hercegovina. *Mittheilungen aus Bosnien und der Hercegovina* **1894**, 392–454.
14. Aziz, M.A.; Pieroni, A.; Abidullah, S.; Nedelcheva, A. A rich fading biocultural diversity? A review of traditional herbal teas used by minorities in the Balkans. *Turk. J. Bot.* **2021**, *45*, 713–722. [CrossRef]
15. Tomasini, S.; Theilade, I. Local Knowledge of Past and Present Uses of Medicinal Plants in Prespa National Park, Albania. *Econ. Bot.* **2019**, *63*, 217–232. [CrossRef]
16. Pieroni, A.; Ibraliu, I.; Abbasi, A.M.; Papajani-Toska, V. An ethnobotanical study among Albanians and Aromanians living in the Rraicë and Mokra areas of Eastern Albania. *Genet. Res. Crop. Evol.* **2015**, *62*, 477–500. [CrossRef]
17. Pieroni, A.; Cianfaglione, K.; Nedelcheva, A.; Hajdari, A.; Mustafa, B.; Quave, C.L. Resilience at the border: Traditional botanical knowledge among Macedonians and Albanians living in Gollobordo, Eastern Albania. *J. Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.* **2014**, *10*, 31. [CrossRef]
18. Quave, C.L.; Pieroni, A. Fermented foods for food security and food sovereignty in the Balkans: A case study of the Gorani people of Northeastern Albania. *J. Ethnobiol.* **2014**, *34*, 28–43. [CrossRef]
19. Pieroni, A.; Nedelcheva, A.; Hajdari, A.; Mustafa, B.; Scaltriti, B.; Cianfaglione, K.; Quave, C.L. Local knowledge on plants and domestic remedies in the mountain villages of Peshkopia (Eastern Albania). *J. Mt. Sci.* **2014**, *11*, 180–194. [CrossRef]
20. Quave, C.L.; Pieroni, A. A reservoir of ethnobotanical knowledge informs resilient food security and health strategies in the Balkans. *Nat. Plants* **2015**, *1*, 14021. [CrossRef]
21. Gopčević, S. *Makedonien und Alt-Serbien*; von L.W. Seidel & Sohn: Vienna, Austria, 1889.
22. Doda, B.E.; Nopcsa, F. *Albanisches Bauernleben in oberen Rekatal dei Dibra (Makedonien)*; LIT: Vienna, Austria, 2007.
23. Mirčevska, M.P. *Verbalni i Neverbalni Etnički Simboli vo Gorna Reka*; Institut za Etnologija i Antropologija: Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, 2007.
24. Murati, Q. Gjuha e humbur: Vëzhgime historike, linguistike, onomastike dhe folklorike rreth shqiptarëve ortodoksë në etnoregjionin e Rekës së Epërme të Mavrovës. *Stud. Albanol.* **2011**, *3*, 87–133.
25. Pieroni, A.; Rexhepi, B.; Nedelcheva, A.; Hajdari, A.; Mustafa, B.; Kolosova, V.; Cianfaglione, K.; Quave, C.L. One century later: The folk botanical knowledge of the last remaining Albanians of the upper Reka Valley, Mount Korab, Western Macedonia. *J. Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.* **2013**, *9*, 22. [CrossRef]
26. Islami, Z. Material Leksikor dhe Onomastik nga Krahinëza e Malit të Thatë të Tetovës. *Stud. Albanol.* **2009**, *1*, 201–216.
27. International Society of Ethnobiology. Code of Ethics. Available online: https://www.ethnobiology.net/what-we-do/coreprograms/ise-ethics-program/code-of-ethics/ (accessed on 18 September 2022).
28. WFO. The World Flora Online. Available online: http://www.worldfloraonline.org/ (accessed on 18 September 2022).
29. Stevens, P.F. Angiosperm Phylogeny Website. Version 14. Available online: http://www.mobot.org/MOBOT/research/APweb/ (accessed on 18 September 2022).
30. Pieroni, A.; Sõukand, R.; Quave, C.L.; Hajdari, A.; Mustafa, B. Traditional food uses of wild plants among the Gorani of South Kosovo. *Appetite* **2017**, *108*, 83–92. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
31. Pieroni, A.; Sõukand, R. The disappearing wild food and medicinal plant knowledge in a few mountain villages of North- Eastern Albania. *J. Appl. Bot. Food Qual.* **2017**, *90*, 58–67.
32. Georgiev, M. *Balgarska Narodna Medicina. Enciklopedia*; Bulgarian Folk Medicine. Encyclopedia; Akademichno Izdatelstvo Prof. Marin Drinov: Sofia, Bulgaria, 1999.
33. Marinov, D. *Izbrani Proizvedenija. 1.1 Narodne Vyara*; Selected Works. 1.1 Folk beliefs; Iztok-Zapad: Sofia, Bulgaria, 2003.
34. Marinov, D. *Izbrani Proizvedenija. 1.2 Religiozni Narodni Obichai*; Selected Works. 1.2 Religious Folk Customs; Iztok-Zapad: Sofia, Bulgaria, 2013.
35. Pieroni, A.; Zahir, H.; Amin, H.I.M.; Sõukand, R. Where tulips and crocuses are popular food snacks: Kurdish traditional foraging reveals traces of mobile pastoralism in Southern Iraqi Kurdistan. *J. Ethnobiol. Ethnomed.* **2019**, *15*, 59. [CrossRef]
36. Puzović, P. *Kratka Istorija Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve*; Kalenić: Kargujevac, Serbia, 2000.

37. Matejić, J.S.; Stefanović, N.; Ivković, M.; Živanović, N.; Marin, P.D.; Džamić, A.M. Traditional uses of autochthonous medicinal and ritual plants and other remedies for health in Eastern and South-Eastern Serbia. *J. Ethnopharmacol.* **2020**, *261*, 113186. [CrossRef]
38. Kalle, R.; Sõukand, R. Wild plants eaten in childhood: A retrospective of Estonia in the 1970s–1990s. *Bot. J. Linn. Soc.* **2013**, *172*, 239–253. [CrossRef]
39. Sõukand, R.; Kalle, R. *Changes in the Use of Wild Food Plants in Estonia: 18th–21st Century*; Springer: New York, NY, USA, 2016.
40. Svanberg, I.; Sõukand, R.; Luczaj, L.; Kalle, R.; Zyryanova, O.; Dénes, A.; Papp, N.; Nedelcheva, A.; Seskauskaite, D.; Kolodziejska-Degorska, I.; et al. Uses of tree saps in northern and eastern parts of Europe. *Acta Soc. Bot. Polon.* **2012**, *81*, 343–357. [CrossRef]
41. Bartl, P. *Kryptochristentum und Formen des Religiösen Synkretismus in Albanien*; Trofenik: Munich, Germany, 1967.
42. Pieroni, A. Gathered wild food plants in the upper valley of the Serchio river (Garfagnana), central Italy. *Econ. Bot.* **1999**, *53*, 327–341. [CrossRef]
43. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Paulician". Encyclopedia Britannica. 11 November 2020. Available online: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Paulicians (accessed on 2 October 2022).
44. Qafleshi, M. Journey of Goranis' from Bogomils' to Islam. *Rev. Europ. Stud.* **2018**, *10*, 2.