

ALBANIAN CARD GAMES - A RECENT TRADITION?

Franco Pratesi – 13.10.1997

In my first exchange of correspondence with Robert Kissel, he wrote that I was very fortunate to live so near to Albania, being thus in condition to collect the rules, mostly unknown, of the traditional card games played there. He could scarcely know that, while I am a frequenter of libraries, I am not experienced in holding interviews with foreign people. However, on the very first conversation I had with an Albanian, I was reminded of Robert Kissel's suggestion and asked the Albanian about the popular card games of his country.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The person I interviewed was almost forty years of age, by trade a mechanical engineer, and came from Shkodër, near to the border with Crna Gora. His report may be considered as representative of his town and his generation, but not for the whole country and its environment. I asked him, too, for historical information.

To begin with, I asked about the card games of his parents and grandparents. I had expected that there might be an Italian 40-card pack still in use and, moreover, that Venetian suitmarks of cups, batons, curved swords and coins had been well known. I was curious to know whether this Venetian pack was known as a 52 card, a 40-card, or a somehow reduced version, more suitable for playing Trappola or derived games.

In the event, all my guesses were wrong. The engineer told me that his grandparents' generation did not, in fact, play cards, for their preferred pastimes were board games. Here again, what I found may sound unexpected: my guess had been, firstly draughts and secondly chess. The answer, in fact, was first, Nine Men's Morris and second (although hardly a surprise) several variants of backgammon, with draughts and chess being little known or quite unknown.

As for playing cards, only the 52 international pack is on sale, with 2 additional Jokers, which may be or not be used, according to the specific game. The usual order runs from Kings high down to Twos, with Aces in some games the highest card, and in others the lowest. No reduced pack is used except for single cases, which are not enough to indicate a tradition for a smaller pack.

I was finally provided with the rules of three games, considered as representative of the traditional games of Albania. I tested the rules and asked for some details which appeared to be lacking (with advice from John McLeod). I can append here their translation, as follows.

1 - PESË KATE

The meaning of the name is Five Floors, and it is explained by the evolution of the game itself. It requires four players, either in partnership or independently. It is a trick-taking game, with a mixture of successive deals where the object passes from taking the most cards to avoiding to take tricks containing specific cards. There are no trumps and one must follow suit whenever possible.

Four deals are played according to rules a-d below, and this set of four is traditionally repeated 5 times (hence the name, but shorter games of 3 "floors" are also played), with scores being noted after each deal.

- a. Each trick taken counts +2 (thus 26 total points are available).
- b. Each Heart card taken counts -2.
- c. Each Queen taken counts -4.
- d. The King of Spades taken counts -16.

Points are added and the final score is reached after the twenty deals of the game.

2 - ZING

This name has no meaning in the Albanian language. To an Albanian, it gives the rather surprising impression of something Chinese. It may be played by two or four (in partnership) players. The pack is the standard 52-card one, without Jokers. In some cases, players may agree to shorten the game by playing without Queens and Kings.

Cards are dealt four at a time, and four are added to the table in a stack, so that only the topmost is visible. The stack of cards on the table can be taken by pairing the topmost card with a card in hand. Jacks are an exception and each of them can take the whole stack on the table. If a player cannot take, he adds one of his cards face-up on the stack. If a player takes the stack when it is formed by a single card, this is called “Zing” (on condition that the capture is not made by a Jack).

The three covered cards go to the player who first takes the stack and he is the only person who sees them. (It is a matter of preliminary agreement whether (1) a Jack can be left on top of the stack on first deal or better reinserted in the pack and substituted by another card, and (2) a Jack taken by another Jack can be considered a Zing.)

When the four cards dealt to the players are finished, subsequent batches of four are dealt again until available. Any cards remaining on the table at the end of the game are not counted.

Various captures contribute to the score. Majority of cards won gains 5 points. Other special scores are due to Diamond-7 and Clubs-10, each scoring 5 points. Each Zing is counted 10 points. The Zing card is set separately alongside the stack of captured cards, in order to remind us of its score. Game is won by first passing 51 points.

3 - MURLA

The name means “storm”. It is played by three or more players. If more than six play, two packs are used, always with 2 Jokers added to each pack. The family of this game is that of “social climbers”. For a recent review, see J.McLeod, *Climbing in the West*, The Playing-Card, XXV, 1997, pp. 138-140.

All the cards are dealt to the players, the aim being to get rid of them as soon as possible. In order for cards to be played to the table, they must be of higher value within the kind of “combination” played last. The order of combinations is single card, pairs, triples, fours, five in a row and within the same combination, rank gives priority. The Jokers are the highest cards, and the red one is considered higher. When a Joker is substituted for a different card, the combination is not different from that without Jokers. If a player has no better combination, or if he so prefers, he passes. If everybody passes, the combination to be played again begins from singles.

The aim is to give away one’s cards: as soon as a player is left without cards, he scores the maximum of points, corresponding to the number of the players less 1; lower and lower points, down to zero are scored by the other players ordered according to the number of cards still in hand. The game goes on until the final score is reached, fixed beforehand, for instance 42, 52, or 82 points, depending on the number of players.

CONCLUSION

The use of the international 52-card pack in Albania can be taken as indicating of a rather recent tradition. If the cards are recent, the traditional games can be old. Now, the impression is that most of these “traditional” Albanian games are of rather recent introduction too, and their plausible provenance is not so near as Venice. Pessë Kate belongs to a family of variants which is now widely spread internationally and whose origin is difficult to ascertain. John McLeod has pointed out to me the strict analogy between Zing and Pishti, a traditional Turkish game. Other analogies may indicate China as the plausible source for Murla. History tells us that recently, and for decades, China has not been very “far” from Albania.