

Official



# Albanian Cultural Resource Handout



! Tip: the red background of the Albanian flag stands for bravery and strength and the double headed eagle for unity and independence, can also signify the 2 dialects of the Albania language

## Background to this resource:

Within the UK, law enforcement agencies investigating Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) deal with a high proportion of victims who are foreign nationals (75% of victims referred into the NRM in 2023 were non-British citizens, 24% of all those referred in 2023 were Albanians) therefore there is a demand for cultural competency. Police officers who are equipped with tailored cultural resources that acknowledge and appreciate specific cultural needs are better positioned to gain the necessary trust of modern slavery victims and support them appropriately.

This resource accompanied by the webinar aims to provide an insight into the Albanian culture and has been collated using expertise of many individuals credited below. It is important to note that people within a single country can have a range of experiences, attitudes and cultural practices; individuals may not conform to every generalisation about their culture.

## Historical background:



Occupied by the Ottomans for over 500 years, Albanians were subjected to various forms of oppression and exploitation. Before the Ottoman invasion, Christianity was the predominant religion among Albanians. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans War, Albania gained independence as a result in 1912.

From 1946 to 1991, 45 years of rigid communism affirmed the hierarchical and gender structures which existed already in Kanun law which refers to customs and traditions. People were prevented from leaving the country, facing fatal consequences if attempted. Often, the radio was the sole means of social communication, contributing to widespread political propaganda. Religion was strictly prohibited during the Communist era.

By March 1997, Albania was in a civil war, triggered by the collapse of 'pyramid schemes' (similar to Ponzi fraud schemes). This prompted the mass exodus of Albanian citizens seeking refuge elsewhere.

The Kosovo conflict of 1998–99 saw ethnic Albanians oppose Serbs and the government of Yugoslavia. The conflict arose from long-standing tensions between the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo, who sought greater independence, and the Serbian government, which sought to maintain control.

Post-Communism has seen problems of corruption, poverty and instability. Opportunities differ according to education background. Youth culture has been on the increase, influenced by social media, with a desire to be part of global culture. In recent decades there has been a move to more liberalism. The Albanian government is now more democratic, but security issues remain.

Mass international migration has become a lifeline in recent decades as a means to change their economic status and a desire to be more comparable to their EU neighbours. Although Albania is considered a 'safe country' this may be very different for trafficked victims, there is also still evidence of corruption throughout the country.

Albanians also reside in neighbouring states – Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo etc. so there is a need to consider the historical context in these nations too. For example, Kosovo were members of Yugoslavia and state violence in the 1980 and 1990s included many war crimes. This is considered by some to have been overlooked by international bodies. Kosovo gained independence in 2008.



**TIP: Avoid stereotyping and be aware cultural differences may well exist within Albanian culture**

## Greetings:

Being able to speak a few phrases will support initial engagement and show an interest in the culture. Respect is important for Albanians in particular for the older generations. The Albanian language is spelled more or less phonetically with the main emphasis on the last syllable of a word. So, for instance, you will pronounce Faleminderit (Thank you) like this: fah-leh-mee-ndEH-reet

Mire se erdhe - welcome (when someone comes to meet you, or arrives in your office/place)

Pershendetje, si jeni? – Hello, how are you? (pronounced per-SHEN-det-ye si jeni)

Ç'kemi, si je? – Hi, how are you? / What's up? (more informal/younger generation)

Miremengjes – Good morning, miredita – good day, mirembrema – good evening

Mirupafshim – Goodbye (pronounced meer-uh-pAh-fsheem)

Mos ke/keni merak – Do not be worried/don't worry

Si e ke emrin? – What is your name?

Sa vjec jeni? – How old are you?

Jemi ketu per t'ju ndihmuar – We are here to help you



The tone of voice is equally important as the words used. Ensure you speak calmly, softly, and empathetically. Be patient if the person has difficulty responding or seems distrustful initially, trust takes considerable time to build. Take note of body language and signs of being uncomfortable. Reassurance of a safe environment, information on rights and support can assist.

- ! **TIPS: Maintain open and non-threatening body language. Make sure to maintain eye contact as a sign of respect and sincerity. Asking about family members will often be seen as a sign of respect and politeness and can be a buffer to more formal questioning.**

**Shqipe (short for 'shqiponje') which refers to the eagle can be used to acknowledge that you know they are Albanian. Positioning your hands in the form of a bird/eagle to signify its importance and tune into the national pride in their flag can be a useful ice breaker if it is known they have nationalist pride.**

**A handshake for males, can be viewed as a sign of respect when some level of trust has been gained.**

**Coffee culture is very important in Albania – offering a cup of coffee at the start could help**



## Key cultural elements:



Albanians have a strong sense of community, readily offering support to both strangers and fellow Albanians in times of need. However, within a UK community, the initial years can be seen as preparation for those that follow, typically relocating to pursue other opportunities. The UK diaspora may feel they will not be judged if they move away from fellow Albanians, feeling less pressure to impress, which could contribute to the fragmentation within the UK community. There is a lot more emphasis on community over individual life than in the UK, especially outside of urban areas like Tirana. In the North, people can be deeply involved in each other's lives.

Albanian language is unique, it is how Albanians define themselves. Two dialects exist: Gheg (Northern) and Tosk (Southern) with the dividing line the Shkumbin River in central Albania. Despite this division, speakers of each dialect can generally understand one another.

Culturally, Albanians are recognised for their resilience and strong work ethic, shaped by enduring hardship from the past. There is an importance placed on men in particular to show wealth accumulated in the form of property and high-performance cars. Car washes are very common in Albania (and has links to modern slavery in the UK), often reflecting a pride in vehicle presentation.

There can be anxiety among Albanians regarding their social status and how they are perceived globally. They may feel discriminated against due to their Albanian identity in the media and experience a sense of exclusion from wider society but national pride remains. They often strive for respect and recognition. Some individuals perceive turning to crime as a viable option when they feel they have nothing to lose and believe it can provide for their family as a result. The rejection of an asylum claim can heighten those feelings and vulnerabilities.

Respect for elders and family is deeply ingrained, alongside a strong determination to avoid bringing shame to one's family. Additionally, traditional gender roles tend to prioritise male authority and dominance within Albanian society.

Food and music are both very important, Albanians are very generous hosts and there is a saying: "bread and salt is all I have, but I give it to you with a light heart".

There exists a strong sense of pride in their country but they have also inherited parts of neighbouring cultures too such as Turkish, Greek.

The coffee culture is very important, men can be observed in groups spending hours talking, conducting business and smoking can be part of this cultural aspect too.

Prominent Albanians including Mother Theresa, medieval military commander Skanderbeg, Dua Lipa, Rita Ora (ethnic Albanians from Kosovan but considered by some to be Albanian – part of 'larger Albania') and Adem Jashari - a Kosovan war hero.

**! TIP: Code of Besa/honour, is claimed as sacred and should not be broken. The opinion of others is also very important. This feeds into the significance of hospitality and looking after others (elderly, in-laws and strangers in trouble). The honour side of the term is comparable to 'omerta' a mafia term meaning code of silence about criminal activity and a refusal to give evidence to the police "loyal to the oath of omertà". To break besa is the highest violation. This can lead to a blood feud, this can also refer to lack of trust in state and society. Violence and abuse are often justified in the name of besa and can often be seen as a way to resolve conflict.**



## Main reasons for migration:

The primary driving force behind migration is economic, aimed at reducing poverty and securing the means to support families, particularly the elderly. This is often seen as a necessary sacrifice for family well-being and migratory risks can often be overlooked in the decision-making process. Usually, the sons of the family will migrate first, as migration is often linked to masculinity.

Education and employment opportunities are additional factors. Albanians have a strong work ethic, whether that be for agriculture, industry and at times criminal activity. Some may perceive those from the UK as less hardworking, leading Albanians to migrate to contribute to the workforce and support their home communities. Turning to crime can be seen as a viable way to make more money, relatively quickly, invest into businesses and maintain family.

Albanians may look to escape the corruption in politics and economic instability or escape family issues, domestic abuse and perceived hopelessness of poverty within Albania, or to live more freely, within the LGBTQ+ community for example. Most of those who migrate send money back home (especially for the older generations), investing in the country and/or buy properties. A brain drain scenario occurs due to lack of educational and career opportunities. Some feel they are unable to compete fairly because of corruption or feel under paid (Albanian Police officers can earn as little as £460/month).

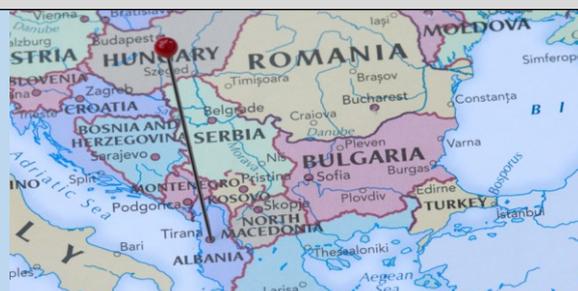
Blood feuds or Gjakmarrje (blood taken) can be a reason for migration, this is less of a significance now and there have been some bogus claims, but can still be a risk factor, more so in the North and rural areas if they need to return. Hakmarrje – means revenge taken.

Migration can be an opportunity to gain a career status and wealth, a need for material signs of success or breaking the cycle of hopelessness. However, Albanians might build a big house back home with their earnings but only their elderly parents live there. Migratory risks can often be overlooked in the migrant family decision-making process.

Migration can be to escape gang involvement or law enforcement. If migrants are shunned by the local population, shame and rejection can heighten vulnerabilities. Being unable to work as an asylum seeker in the UK can create a feeling of being marginalised. The Illegal Migration Act is also having an impact. If migrants need to return being unable to make a success of living abroad, this can lead to being stigmatised at home and to remigrate. On the other hand, making a success of staying in Albania, can also be viewed negatively with the belief that corruption still exists and that is the reason you have 'made it'. Alternatively, others may struggle with national pride and their traditions when considering migrating for a better future.

It is often considered harder to bring 'dirty' money into Albania now, making opportunities to identify when this has been invested in Albanian property, money may therefore remain in the UK. The majority of Albanians are leaving to earn money, not to get into crime but become easy pickings to gangs if things are harder than expected and reality hits.

- TIP: When investigating a crime, remember that any immigration issues need to be kept separate. Immigration can heighten vulnerabilities.**



## Taboo subjects/prejudices:

Female survivors of sexual exploitation will not necessarily be seen as victims, especially if recruited via the 'lover boy method'. They could be shunned, judged and dishonoured for being duped. Females may feel males will not believe their account; therefore female victims may prefer to speak to a female officer. Victims may not inform family of an unplanned subsequent pregnancy and shame could prevent their return home. They may marry quickly or by force to avoid further humiliation and maintain family honour. Talk of intimate body parts and sexual jokes will be very taboo and bring further shame. Females having multiple partners, sex before marriage amongst rural communities, betrayal, sex working, cheating, stealing another's wife are all examples of dishonour. Albanian males may also face stigma and shame if they have been sexually abused.

Victims may not wish to admit being subject to abuse, this could lead to stigmatisation, they may wish to remain anonymous. Men are often not seen as victims; this would imply weakness or being misled. Men may feel the need to avenge sexual exploitation of females, especially in rural areas.

Divorce used to be forbidden under Kanun law, even if domestic abuse had taken place. The only reason it would be allowed would be if your wife steals from you or betrays you, otherwise a man could be killed by the wife's family. More progressive views exist now but still traditional views can be seen in the North. Divorce is still generally considered to be shameful if a woman divorces at a young age especially if they are considered uneducated and a single mother.

Unlawful employment and criminal activity may be seen as a necessary sacrifice to support family. Drug dealing can be seen as acceptable, sometimes glorified and makes quick money for families. A short prison sentence if detained may be seen to be worth the risk, but stealing can be viewed as shameful; this routes back to Kanun law, sneakiness and lack of honour amongst your community.

LGBTQ+ community may wish to live abroad to avoid stigma, laws are being introduced and Albania is becoming more inclusive, but traditionalist communities and more elderly members may struggle to acknowledge this community.

Those with mental health issues and physical disabilities can also be discriminated against and isolated. Some believe these imply weakness. Males are often portrayed as needing to be strong and not show emotion. Albanians may well not look favourably on going to a psychologist. This is changing in cities, but not so much in rural areas where there is a lack of support and resources.

Some Albanians can be quite prejudiced towards other races, in particular Roma, Greeks in Southern Albania and Serbs, where Albanians may avoid working with them. Lighter skin colour can be viewed as more important. Some Albanians do not recognise national borders; Northern Greeks can be seen as Albanians, can also be tensions between Kosovans and Macedonians, who can blame each other for problems and issues of crime. Albanians in other countries may consider themselves to be stateless, such as those in Macedonia that can face discrimination.

In the past it was a taboo to leave your parents alone and they were taken care of in the family home, this is not as present now but there is still an expectation to look after their welfare.

To be poor can also be shameful, hence the pull to migrate, to make money and better themselves.

**! TIP: There is a difference for men and women in terms of dishonour, especially in rural areas. Men may feel the need to assert strength and 'put right' any wrong doing for their family. Women unfortunately, will often be silenced following their experiences of exploitation so as to avoid the risk of consequences and 'bringing shame' to their family.**

## Family structure/gender dynamics:

There is an importance placed on taking care of family, this is embedded within besa, pride and strong family ties but also reinforced by the lack of a welfare system.

Strong gender roles exist. Men may feel pressure to provide, the elder male is the household head who makes decisions. Men can be seen as protectors of females but there exists a fine line between protector and controller. The North is often seen as more traditional, associated with Kanun and condescending towards females, who may not have a lot of choice and are expected to be submissive. Females are home makers and will gain more respect if they produce sons and gain status in the family hierarchy. In urban areas and amongst younger generations there exists less traditional gender splits and views are more progressive. More females are now seen in powerful roles such as politics, but inequality exists between the genders.

Marriage usually takes place within a person's own region and religion. Traditional communities can still have arranged marriages and this practice can be used as a recruitment tool. After marriage, the wife moves in with her husband's family and can be the carer for in-laws. Male friendship groups are strong and close by, female ones are more dispersed as she moved away. There is pride given to children succeeding, but boys are given more attention and inherit.

Extended families especially in rural areas can be common, with grandparents being well respected and siblings and partners all living together. Family decisions are taken and resources shared. Urban areas can be more of a nuclear/immediate family structure but remain close to parents. Supporting the elderly is common practice as pensions and social care are so limited.



**TIPS: When speaking to Albanians over time, try and bring up reference to family members for instance if they mentioned a wife, son etc. This can assist in relationship building with Albanians placing great emphasis on their family ties and can promote trust if they feel you have listened and taken an interest.**

Sometimes men and women are referred to by their role within the family as opposed to their names: Nusja = bride/wife, Xhaxha = uncle, Mërgim: life abroad as an emigrant, can also mean exile or Kurbet: living elsewhere as a foreigner.

Street culture and gangs has at times gained significance for many young men and may have replaced the family role following cases of divorce, family breakdown or family members migrating. The family remains of importance with families generally not wishing their children to join a gang and a life of crime. Besa has been reinvigorated with gang culture, which can be used to create trust. Look after your 'miqtë' (friends).



## Religion:

There are 3 main religions: a Muslim majority due to the Ottoman influence, including both Suni and Shiite the latter includes Bektashi (a more liberal version of Islam), Orthodox Christians (especially in the South) and Catholics (especially in the North). Some may identify as Muslim but do not practice. Cities are more mixed, but it is generally rare not to believe in God. Albanians generally pride themselves on being extremely tolerant to various religious views, with all main religious holidays celebrated. Notable holidays, not all religious, include (some dates vary):

Ramadan – 9<sup>th</sup> month in Islamic calendar (dates vary but usually between Feb-May)

8<sup>th</sup> March – Women's day

14<sup>th</sup> March – Dita e Veres or Summer Day, "ballokume" a traditional cookie eaten on this day

22<sup>nd</sup> March - Sultan Nevruz – Bektashis festival, a feast, commemorates cousin of the prophet Mohammed.

Catholic Easter – usually in March or April, Orthodox Easter – usually April or early May

Eid al-Fitr to mark the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha – usually in June

1<sup>st</sup> May - International Workers Day, schools and most business close

5<sup>th</sup> September – Saint Theresa Canonisation Day

28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> November – Independence Day and Liberation Day

8<sup>th</sup> December – National Youth Day, commemorating when youths rebelled against Communist



## Food:

Food is a very important part of getting together, social culture, demonstrating besa and hospitality. An abundance of food at a gathering is seen as a success and brings pride, has roots to Communism when food was scarce. Cuisine consists of traditional meat and potato, beans, cabbage in stews, pies, bread and cheese. There are similarities to Greek, Turkish and Italian cuisines with a Mediterranean focus. Veal and lamb are common at celebrations (rump is given to very important guests, shoulder cuts to next important, leg cuts to children). With a majority Muslim population there has been a surge of restaurants serving halal meat. Albanians can be unaccustomed to some English food and the spices of Asian and African cuisines.

Japrak or Dollma (stuffed vine leaves)

Hashure (sweet fermented grains)

Ballokume (sweet cookie eaten at Spring festival)

Sheqerpare (shortbread soaked in sugar syrup)

Bakllava (layered pastry with nuts and syrup)

Raki (strong alcoholic spirit made from grapes)

Byrek (pie filled with various fillings)



**! TIP: Allow time for a coffee to build rapport and engagement. Being able to eat culturally sensitive food was listed amongst the Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (MSCOS created the minimum 7 core outcomes of support) for Survivor Recovery, Wellbeing and Integration.**

## Education/career prospects:

There has been increased investment in empowering females, particularly in urban areas aimed at reducing dependence on men. However, such initiatives are less common in rural areas where there is more emphasis on working the land. Boys are typically given priority, but if they do not excel academically, migration may be encouraged to help support the family financially. In more traditional communities, particularly in the North, boys may be encouraged to leave school at 16 or 17 years old and seek employment to contribute to the family's income.

Fathers may often decide who attends education and determine career choices for their children. If a girl has developed physically, she may be prevented from attending school and arrangements are made to marry her more quickly. In some more traditional families children are perceived as the parents' property, phrases such as 'I made/own your head' can be heard if children try and speak out against elders. Parents often have a desire for children to succeed and may strive to get children to university especially in more urban areas. This creates a strong will and financial burden to give back to parents.



Men may prioritize instant gratification over pursuing education for long-term success, opting instead for opportunities like self-employment or joining family ventures to acquire assets like cars or houses. Men in more traditional communities may feel threatened by women going to work and seek to prevent them from doing so. Wealth in the form of material things is seen as a sign of success. The gap between 'haves' and 'have nots' has increased. Education can often be a class issue with those that are unable to afford it and still striving for instant gratification at times resorting to crime. Glorification of criminal lifestyles and the influence of social media contribute to the belief among some individuals that wealth can be easily attained.

Modern day influences, learning of opportunities further afield, escaping traditional and patriarchal structures can all be strong motives for migration and wanting to rebel against societal norms. Education in Albania is often not considered to be enough to achieve success, so they may not attach huge importance to continuing with it. There is a high percentage of those dropping out of education, with the system still seen as weak. There is still much to do in terms of supporting those with learning difficulties, victims of bullying and improving social education.



## Interaction with authority:

There is a lack of trust in the State which has historical routes. Consequently Albanians will often put up a 'guard' if attempts are not made to build bridges and nurture a trusting relationship. Lack of trust in Police is significant, often they will assume their accounts will not be believed and may provide a different account to avoid prejudice. Some will also fear punishment and consequences from both traffickers and at times families, if they say something they should not. Threats against families back home are common and a culturally competent and trauma informed practice is vital. It is important to go slow and build trust prior to intense questioning. Corruption issues are improving but there is still a belief with some that money can buy everything, justice included. In the past, if you knew or had a relative in the police, you would expect certain advantages.

Albanians may refrain from going to the Police for fear of being judged. Survivors need to feel confident that their testimony will be taken seriously and investigated. Seeing an officer in a uniform, being given forms that they do not understand, will both heighten anxiety and intimidation fears. They may well have been used to receiving limited information about their rights, support and being kept informed about the process. They may also have difficulty expressing themselves in front of authority due to anxiety and mistrust issues. Fear of being detained and deported have been worsened by media reports.

Sexual crimes can bring dishonour, even as the survivor. In contrast, men involved in criminal exploitation, particularly in drug-related activities, may be seen as acceptable or normalised within certain contexts. This can be seen as providing for the family. Sentences in the UK may not be seen as a deterrent compared to the money that could be made or not being labelled as a 'snitch'.

Albanians tend to be more trusting to religious authorities, they often played positive roles during COVID and encouraging vaccines. Authorities within educational settings are usually viewed with respect. Media often exposes the identity of the victims and are therefore not trusted. Sometimes people film the scene and share with the abuse scenes going viral. With the wider community, Albanians may rely on their own communities in the UK for work and protection, but they still tend to be somewhat guarded. The family would undoubtedly be the authority that is trusted the most and this has become more important due to a lack of state support.

- ! **TIPS: Keep your word on what is promised, to avoid trust being broken. Albanians will tend to take you literally so be very clear on what you say. If you say 'call me anytime with any further information' and are then not available or not working when they call, may cause frustration and confusion. (Roots back to Besa, that a promise should not be broken). Instead stipulate what exact times you are available or advise you may not be able to answer all the time, but you will get back to them as soon as you can. It is also important to provide updates where appropriate on the investigation.**

**To be a 'snitch' is very degrading in Albania, again links to Besa, keeping your word and during the Communist era, when people were hired to spy on others and report to the authorities. Try and support them to understand there is a higher cause in terms of keeping others safe, despite how important Besa is. Be mindful they may feel let down if they feel their disclosure has not led to anything and they were a 'snitch' for 'nothing'.**

**Do not overlook tattoos and markings, these can be specific to Albanian ex-special forces or relate to blood feuds and gangs. Examples include a snake, scorpion, black spider or black eagle with a dagger. The special forces shoulder insignia is featured below:**



Do's 👍	Don'ts 👎
Advise there to listen and assist where you can, be consistent and reliable	Use the term victim or prostitution – there is shame attached, not understood
Be approachable and polite – although migrants are often surprised by the latter, especially from police officers.	Be intimidating – will increase embedded anxiety, more informal conversations may make for more open discussion
Be victim-centred and trauma-informed	Provide judgement, stigmatise or generalise
Look to build trust, advise on rights and support available – use specialist NGOs	Discuss gangs – this will most likely be met with an extreme lack of engagement
Ask them to show you where they live on a map to open discussion. They may not recognise boundaries with Macedonia and Kosovo, so avoid reference.	Use phrases such as “are you sure?” or “did you not understand what was happening” or others that might infer you do not believe them.
Consider the wider context – for example, rejection of asylum, impact of having nothing to lose, stigma or shame they may have.	Go overboard with empathy, Albanians may not understand this, as they may not consider themselves to be victims or be used to this behaviour.

**! TIP: Albanian traffickers often use violence as a form of control. ‘Violence has come out from Janah’ can sometimes be used by parents to justify using violence towards their children to ‘educate’ them to obey, or as a punishment to the children who have done something wrong and by being beaten they will not dare to repeat the same ‘bad behaviour’. Husbands and exploiters may use Janah justify their violence towards women who ‘do not listen to them’.**



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