

# Oral History Kosovo

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## MY GRANDMOTHER, THE OLD MAN IN WHITE, AND I

By Dimal Basha

It was something of a tradition for my mother to spend the whole summer vacation with her two sisters. My father, a refugee from Albania, could never visit his family. We gathered at my uncle's house in the village of Balaj, five kilometers from Ferizaj. Grandpa and grandma lived there with two uncles, their wives, and their eight children. We were three children, but when we met also with the eleven members of my aunts' families in Balaj, we became a large extended family of thirty. Since none of us had the financial means to spend proper vacations somewhere else, going to my uncle's country house was the closest thing to visiting a resort.

It was a three bedroom mud-house and we occupied its every corner throughout the summer months. At the end of the front-yard there was a separate building, the *oda*, or the men's room. It was larger than any other room and no woman was ever allowed there. Impressed by pictures I saw in history books, I thought that this officially segregated room resembled the Congress of Lezha, where five hundred years ago our national hero Gjergj Skanderbeg gathered all the Albanian tribes to fight the Ottoman Empire. At night though, due to lack of space, the *oda* was unceremoniously converted into a sleeping camp for all the kids.

We were on vacation having fun, the kids playing and the men sitting in their *oda*, but the women were busy with a tight working schedule. They were the first to wake up in the morning and the last to go to sleep, like workers in the cooperatives of Hoxha's Albania. This routine seemed normal at the time, but now I can freely compare it to that of a North Korean labour camp.

The women's toughest task was to put kids to sleep in the evening, an absolute nightmare and an impossible mission. In order to accelerate this process, our grandma often intimidated us with this threat, "Sleep, or the old man in white will come!"

My vivid imagination did a great job visualizing this old man in white. If only grandma knew the scary figure I conjured in my day dreaming, I am pretty certain she would have been terrified too. I never doubted that she meant no harm to us. I am sure that she, and all the other women in the house, were desperate to get us to bed quickly because they were all exhausted. But her threat had a traumatizing effect and her intention boomeranged.

As I lay in bed, the figure of the old white man took shape in my mind and my eyes began to scout the room in search for him. When the wind pierced through the cracks of the old wooden windows, I shivered in fear and stayed awake.

It must have been the summer of 1986. After a long sleepless night, I complained to grandma that whenever she reminded us of the old man I was unable to fall asleep. She felt bad about it and began to

caress me. I reveled in her warm caresses, until she suddenly lifted her head, as if she remembered something and said, “You have to learn some prayers, then you will be fearless. Whenever the devil comes near you, you will say the prayers, and he will leave.”

I was dumbfounded! The thought that immediately popped into my mind was that the old man in white was the devil himself. Grandma did not explain it thoroughly, but I didn’t hesitate to ask her to write down the prayers so that I could learn them as soon as possible. I chased her all day to remind her of it.

Finally, grandma handed me a piece of paper with the prayers written on it. I can’t recall who actually wrote them, because she was illiterate. I unfolded that piece of paper and skimmed through it, quickly realizing that there were words I did not understand. They were written in Albanian, but nothing made sense. It was not something I had learned in school, although I was seven years-old and could already read and write.

Grandma explained that they were in Arabic, “The same language used by the imam when he calls for prayers,” she said. Ah! I said to myself, I understand now! They are written in Albanian but they sound Arabic. “But why in Arabic?” I asked grandma. “It is God’s language,” she said and gazed straight into my eyes smiling, as if she loved me even more, now that I was committed to learn “God’s language.”

I did wonder for a second, does God speak only Arabic? But I had the old man in white to worry about and I soon suspended my judgment and headed towards grandma’s room. It was the only quiet room in the house because kids were not allowed to play there and I thought it would be perfect for praying. At that time God was a concept that I did not understand at all, and the reason I immersed myself into prayers was not faith, it was the old man in white. He was stuck in my mind as the devil, and I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to prevent him to pass through the cracks in the window.

I spent all day praying. There were three prayers in total and one was really long. In school I was very good at memorizing and reciting poetry. Most of the poems were by Naim Frashëri, Gjergj Fishta, Andon Zako Çajupi and many other Albanian famous poets, whose collections were in our home’s library. But the prayers at hand were difficult for two reasons: first, I could not pronounce them; second, I was unable to understand their meaning and could not connect to them emotionally as I did with Çajupi’s poetry, for instance.

I asked grandma how to pronounce a word that had a difficult sound. She did not read it, since she didn’t know how, but she began to tell the prayer from the beginning, then stopped at the word I had difficulty pronouncing, and repeated it with me.

In the end, she said I should focus only on one prayer. It was the first one and it wasn't very long. "This one is very good," she said. "Whenever you recite it, two angels will land on your shoulders, one on your left shoulder and one on your right, and they will protect you from the devil. When the devil sees the angels, he will flee."

Not even for a second did I doubt my grandma's words. I was her favorite, or at least that's how I felt. After I had the pronunciation guidelines and her story about the angels, I continued repeating the prayer in her room. I felt good for the time being, but then I started imagining angels landing on my shoulders and, to tell the truth, that too terrified me.

Grandma had just confirmed the existence of imaginary creatures. I believed that these creatures didn't live only in my dreams, or in my imagination, they were for real and could creep into the house through cracks in the windows. A war was going on between these forces, the devil on one side and the angels on the other.

I learned my first prayer, the best one, according to grandma. After night fell, we went to sleep and I started whispering the prayer a hundred times. On other occasions, we kids had whispered so that the grownups wouldn't hear us, as they often came to check whether we had fallen asleep. I was the one who whispered the most to keep the others awake, because I didn't want to be the only one awake when the old man in white visited. I never thought, what if he visits us while we are sleeping? It would have been more logical to lie awake and wait for him, as we would have had a better chance to escape. But, no! I had only one goal, to doze off as soon as possible because sleep was the only escape from a terrifying encounter with the devil.

While I whispered my only prayer, I heard random whispers coming from other kids. I ignored them and sped up my prayer, fearing I would forget a word. I made sure to pronounce each word correctly, fearing that God would not understand his native Arabic in my Albanian pronunciation.

My existence depended on that single prayer. Whenever I stopped reciting, my imagination would provide me with scenes of the old man in white battling the angels in the attempt to possess us humans. But now I was equipped with a piece of paper promising that imaginary creatures on my shoulders would serve as guardians at night. I kept that piece of paper under my pillow, as I did with Çajupi's works. It was a strategy that we used, as kids, to help us memorize poems while we were sleeping.

I found dreams tedious because they would wake me up in the middle of the night. This terrified me because it started again the endless routine of reciting the one prayer I knew, and made me aware that I was the only one awake.

Miraculously, these tempestuous thoughts were present only at night. During the day there was no darkness, everything was illuminated and the fear I felt disappeared, but not always. This was a consequence of another of my grandma's stories.

She once said that this old man in white, or the personification of the devil in my mind, went hiding in the forest during the day. Knowing this, I was categorically against stepping into the forest during the day without an adult. This was making things difficult, since often we were ordered to go to the forest with a small cart to collect firewood, which was also a way "to earn our meals." Despite the fear of being denied a meal, I often refused to go.

Whenever I did go, which was rare, I made sure there were three or four of us. When my uncle's older son went to the forest by himself, I thought he was the greatest man I knew, not because he collected more firewood than we did, which he did, but because he didn't fear the forest. Of course I imagined that his mind too was haunted by the old man in white who dwelled in the forest.

The prayer served me only in darkness and not during the day, but I did recite it when stray dogs passed near me. I was told by my cousin that prayers would protect me from them too. He suggested that prayers protected grandma from marauding dogs when she returned from her visits to her extended family during the night.

I didn't hesitate to learn also the other two prayers. I endlessly whispered them until I mastered them. I found the whispering curious. Praying was not like reciting a poem or singing a song for that matter. I found reciting beautiful and I was a member of the recitation group at my school, but praying was not reciting. I was always reminded that I should "say prayers inwardly, in my mind."

I was never much of a singer, but the music teacher would always give me an A so he wouldn't ruin my average, though prayers were not songs. They were a bunch of words written in Albanian and pronounced in Arabic, which I was supposed to whisper in my head. Sometimes prayers made me braver. I mean, just the thought of two white angels standing on my shoulders, monitoring the horizon against possible dangers, was a comfort.

It was later that I first heard God's language played in songs. I came across it while attending a *mevlud*, the event that commemorates a dead person. I always insisted on joining the adults when they were invited to such events. I happened to be present at a *mevlud* together with other men from my uncle's family, the village imam, and some other youngsters. There, I heard songs in the same language of the

whispers that kept the old man in white away.

Everyone sat still, with their sad faces mourning the dead. I sat shyly in a corner with countless questions going through my mind. I suspected that I wasn't the only one who did not understand the language that I had been whispering for some time. None of the men seemed to understand it, except perhaps the imam. I grew up listening to English songs whose lyrics I did not understand, but there was always the melody that seduced me. There was nothing particular about the songs at the *mevlud*. There were no music instruments. Half a dozen youngsters sitting in the middle of the room gazed at the ceiling and sang in a language neither they nor I understood.

This is quite a show, I thought. But I had to keep this suspicion to myself because I was a child, and the adults wouldn't have hesitated to quickly show me my place. "Sit still, you are too young to understand," was their answer when I asked an inappropriate question. It was later in life that I realized that age wasn't the best measure of intelligence.

The choir stopped for a short break. Just then I approached a young singer and asked, "What was this last song about?" "They are all celestial chants devoted to God," he said. "Good, very good," I said. "But what do the lyrics say? Do you understand Arabic?" "No, no I don't know any Arabic, but we are taught to memorize and sing the prayers," he said, looking confused.

Hmmm, all this celebration accompanied by music without instruments, sung by youngsters who keep gazing at the ceiling and don't understand their songs! Except that the crowd of men seemed to find peace in those melodies. At times they would smoke a cigarette and grab a piece of meat from the plates displayed in front of them, but they did it discreetly, remaining still, with their heads bowed down.

Did I tell you there were no women present? They only appeared at the door from time to time to bring trays with meat and vegetables. They remained in a separate room, and I don't know whether they had a choir of their own that was supposed to bring them comfort. I continued to observe the men's show closely. I was amazed at this "God's incomprehensible language business" and what was particularly fascinating for me was the fact that we, including me, were an inseparable part of it. These are fragments of my journey growing up that I can still vividly recall.

My grandma was an uneducated old woman who loved and cared for us in her own way. She prayed five times a day at home, whispering God's language, and I imagine that she must have been struggling much more than I did. There are numerous memories that connect me to grandma but her stories about the old man in white, the angels, and God's language, were very special. It was the first time my imagination turned into a horror movie. Before then, I would conjure a blue car I dreamed of, or the jersey of the most

famous football player in the world with my name on the back.

The man who grandma introduced to me, and then the angels sent to protect me from him, made me feel like a wounded, frightened small bird in its nest. Her introduction to God, his chosen language, and his soldiers, was supposed to help, yet they produced mostly fear. Only later I realized that not just my grandma, but also the same omnipotent God who created good and evil had been struggling with them for eternity.

The old man in white remained a bitter memory, but the memory and love for my grandma were never bitter. The last time I said goodbye to her was as I was leaving home to seek a better future overseas, like many other young people from Kosovo. There were only the two of us when we said goodbye. She was very sad. I hugged her and said, "We'll meet very soon." "I don't think so," she said, "You are going far. At least here I saw you from time to time." She was right, we never saw each other again.

(A slightly different version of this story appeared in Kosovo 2.0)