

Elvis Bardhoshi

Prof. Filip Stabrowski

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OPINGA

Living in groups has been a principle of humans since the beginning of times and it is still continuous nowadays, even though in larger numbers. Being a part of a group leads people to adapt to each other and to what they do for a living, what they believe, what they eat, and one of the important things, how they dress. It's been clear that living amongst a particular group, the chances to adapt and have so much in common with that certain group are very high. Considering one of the most common things that people have to each other when living in a community is the way they wear. Clothes aren't just some pieces of fabric colored or not so we can just cover our bodies, but they have so much more meaning knitted into them. They transmit identity, tradition, history, culture, status within different cities and countries. In other words, fashion makes it so easy to distinguish people from one region compared to people from another region.

However, despite the fact that everyone has a different culture and fashion which somehow are interconnected, they still have great power in connecting people with absolute differences. People like to explore, see new things, try new things, adapt to the new fashion, the fashion that has come from a different place and it looks so fancy, yet so simple at the same time. Tradition has been among us for hundreds of years and still goes around and that's because of the people who didn't want to lose traces of their ancestors. Fashion is one of the best ways to represent tradition and keep history alive and somehow always remember the people who left the

traditional heritage behind for generations to come. Being part of a community where the traditions are saved for hundreds of years makes you want to keep the tradition going and everything that comes with it. One of the biggest traditions in my country of origin has been the traditional clothing, where everyone had the same design of clothes, however that changes based on different regions. In Northern Albania, the region where I'm from, we have this kind of shoes that we call, "Opinga".

Opinga's origin is very ancient so that there is believed that they were first created in the IV – V centuries BC. *Science Academy, Institute of History*, states that, "The opinga have also been worn by Albanians in Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, and Italy. Moreover, also from Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and other places too". So. It seems like opinga were a part of these countries' daily fashion to wear on a daily basis. But why? We will get to that point very soon. But first, let's get into more detail about opinga and how they were supposed to be produced and how are they are made nowadays and if they have the same purpose. Based on the book, "Historical Studies". 1967. p. 123, by *Science Academy, Institute of History* the author writes, ". Opinga are a part of the Illyrian culture, and the proofs show their use in Albania comes from the iconographic painter Onufri which dates back to the XVI century". It has been studied that the origin of this word, "opinga" comes from the old Albanian language, api (today's language "hap" or step in English.

Opinga are made out of leather, and since in Northern Albania aren't so many different types of animals whose leather is thick enough, cow's leather is the most used one. So, the leather would be left outside to get dried and after that, it would be cut into square shapes. From there, people would take a big needle and some wool thread and start giving the leather a shoe form. Everything on the upper part of the shoe was made of wool with different shapes and

colors. On top of the opinga there are some kinds of buns with single color or multiple colors just for the effect of bouncing when dancing. It wasn't until later that I understood from my father, Kujtim Bardhoshi, that opinga used to be worn at all times. Want to know the reason? Because of the poverty that used to be in those times. Not just in Albania but in so many other countries also, most of which we mentioned above. Also, when I asked my mother, Nafie Bardhoshi, who is a born resident of Northern Albania about the opinga, she answered, "Everyone would wear them. Young girls, teenagers, married women, all the females. The reason is that everyone was equal back then. There was not any family with better living standards within a village or city except the men in power. Besides those people, everyone would wear the same things. Men would wear the opinga with the white wool thread on top and the women with the colorful thread". I remember having my own opinga when I was of young age, and they were very simple ones. Only black and white and to be honest always uncomfortable since the roads were always with small rocks that would "stab" my feet in every step. Anyway, I wasn't the only kid wearing those shoes and there wasn't too much space to complain about it. Well, it seems like opinga were made out of necessity rather than just some random style. Anyways, the thing is coming back to the tradition and the continuation of this "old fashion".

It is good to know that the living standards have grown and nowadays they aren't worn as much as they used to be. However, they are not forgotten because they represent a part of our history. They have become a tradition and every time someone has a wedding or gathering, people wear traditional clothes, including the opinga. But opinga nowadays are not quite the same. Despite the fact that the wool threads remain the same as hundreds of years ago, the only part changed is the sole which is made out of rubber. Over my extended research, I was able to find similar opinga around the world. Opinca is the Romanian opinga which has pretty much the

same idea of the Albanian opinga. Take from the *Virginia's Collection* the author writes, “ The “opinca” is a traditional footwear in Romanian clothing dating since the Dacians early times, since 168 BC. Countryside “opinca” were made out of a rectangular piece of leather or rubber, tightened on the foot with the help of thin strings (“nojite”). The handicraft of making opinci was passed on in the family from father to son. Before 1989 people could really make a living out of it. The opinci, footwear inherited from Dacians, since 168 BC, were worn everywhere. Today, opinci became objects in the museum or souvenirs for Romanian’s patriots or foreign tourists”. It doesn’t seem to have many differences between the Albanian opinga and the Romanian opinca. Everything seems somehow connected to each other and as if travelers made this possible by exchanging knowledge. Moreover, let’s take a look over one more example that may seem quite interesting for our item and its globalization over the world. These kinds of sandals which look somehow upgraded but their roots remain similar to opinga are called huarache and they are made in Mexico. Lauren Cocking, a Northern England writer talks about huaraches history but also how they continue to be popular to Mexicans. In her article for *Culture Trip*, she writes,

“ Although the true origins of the huarache sandal are unclear, it’s most definitely a piece of footwear which predates the European colonialization of Mexico. Primarily associated with rural communities and farmworkers, due to the fairly robust and accessible nature of the materials used to make the shoe, huaraches widely grew in popularity throughout Mexico. This was particularly true during the 20th century, when old rubber car tires, rather than leather or string, began to be utilized to form the sole of the huarache. These clunky car tire soles allowed for greater endurance on the part of the huarache and, combined with nails as opposed to stitching, allowed for the huarache owner to use their sandals for much longer”.

It is fair to say that opinga, opinca, huaraches had one thing in common and they still do. First, they were just for the poor people and as time evolved, they started becoming less practical, instead, more famous and traditional for the people to wear, especially on special occasions such as weddings, different photo shooting sets and not to forget the latest update about huaraches from which NIKE got inspired to do their new sneakers. “Unfortunately, many people only know the word huarache from Nike’s sneaker of the same name. As you can see, there is little to no actual inspiration from the centuries of Mexican and Meso-American footwear involved in the modern sneaker.

Nike, it seems, just chose a word that sounded cool”, says Albert Muzquiz, a writer, and actor who’s been writing for *Hedders* for more than three years. He talks about the huaraches not being recognized as much as they should but however, there are some artisans who keep the tradition going and they still handmake the huaraches for people who still want to wear them. No matter in what part of the world this kind of shoe is, it seems like the purpose of it is almost the same in all of these places because of the long history that they have been through and the people who have chosen willingly or forced by poverty to wear them. In the end, obviously, these shoes are being produced to show a part of the past that has been turned into a tradition that most people follow.

Clothes are something that really can distinguish different cultures, religions, countries from each other but at the same time, their power is so powerful that can destroy boundaries and let people enjoy new things and see the world from a different point of view. Doing this research showed me how similar we all are at the end of the day starting from basic things as shoes. Whenever I see my opinga, I think of other people like me somewhere out there having the same idea of shoes just designed differently. The idea of wearing them just because it’s a traditional

thing to do and not because of poverty it's like bringing all of my ancestors in the present and celebrating together and thanking them for all what they have done and also at the same time feel what they have felt wearing the same shoes. It feels like the past and the present have become one.

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