



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PRIVATE  
COMMERCIAL AND COMPETITION LAW  
(IPICL - AUSTRIA)

## Research Article

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# The Voice of Pain: Lamentation (*Gjama*)<sup>1</sup> from an Anthropological and Psycholinguistic Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ajbals-2026-0003>

### Abstract

This paper examines *gjama*, the traditional Albanian ritual of lamentation, through anthropological and psycholinguistic perspectives, highlighting its role as a culturally codified and performative expression of grief. Unlike spontaneous expressions of pain, *gjama* and related lament practices constitute structured vocal and bodily performances that communicate social, emotional, and symbolic meanings. In northern Albania, *gjama* is performed primarily by men in response to the death of individuals associated with honor, social status, or familial authority, while women participate in complementary mourning practices. The ritual involves formulaic language, repetition, prosodic modulation, rhythmic patterns, and synchronized bodily gestures, thereby transforming personal loss into a collective experience while reinforcing communal cohesion and cultural continuity. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, the vocalizations present in *gjama*—including screams, tremors, and tonal variations—function as forms of emotional prosody that activate neural circuits associated with empathy, emotional perception, and social cognition in both performers and listeners. These paralinguistic features enable grief to be perceived and shared communally, rendering pain communicable across individuals and generations. Moreover, the linguistic formulas embedded within the ritual provide cognitive and emotional scaffolding, allowing performers to articulate structured expressions of grief even under conditions of intense emotional stress. Historically, *gjama* can be traced to pre-Christian and medieval Mediterranean mourning traditions. Literary, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence suggests continuity between ancient funerary laments—such as those found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—and contemporary Albanian practices. Anthropological analysis frames *gjama* as a socially sanctioned mechanism for regulating grief, preserving cultural memory, and affirming social roles. By integrating historical, cultural,

<sup>1</sup> *Gjama* is a traditional Albanian ritual of lamentation for the deceased, particularly known in the northern regions of Albania (Malësia, Dukagjin, Mirdita). It constitutes a structured and codified form of expressing grief through the voice.

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and psycholinguistic perspectives, this study demonstrates that lamentation is not merely an emotional response to death but rather a complex, semiotic, and embodied process through which societies structure, ritualize, and communicate collective suffering.

**Keywords:** Albanian lamentation, gjama, ritual grief, emotional prosody, psycholinguistics, collective mourning, cultural performance, paralinguistic communication.

## 1. Introduction and background

Lamentation for the dead constitutes a foundational discursive and ritual practice through which human societies have historically confronted death, loss, and the disruption of social order. Rather than representing an unmediated emotional reaction, lamentation emerges in anthropological, folkloristic, and ethnomusicological scholarship as a culturally codified genre that regulates grief through language, voice, and performance. Its persistence across geographically and historically distant communities suggests that lamentation fulfills a fundamental communicative and cognitive function: it renders death symbolically intelligible by transforming individual suffering into shared, culturally sanctioned expression (Arukask, 2011; Rosenberg, 2004). From a terminological perspective, lamentation encompasses a constellation of related concepts, including lament, dirge, funeral song, ritual weeping, and mourning poetry. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in general discourse, scholarly treatments emphasize their functional and contextual distinctions. The term *lament* commonly serves as an umbrella category denoting ritualized vocal expression associated with death or symbolic separation, whereas *dirge* typically refers to metrically and melodically stabilized compositions integrated into liturgical or formal funerary contexts. *Ritual weeping*, by contrast, foregrounds the embodied and performative dimensions of grief, highlighting crying and vocalized sorrow as culturally patterned acts rather than spontaneous physiological responses (Arukask, 2011). Within this conceptual framework, *gjama* may be understood as a culturally specific instantiation of lamentation embedded within a broader system of ritual communication. As with other lament traditions, *gjama* is characterized by heightened emotional intensity, direct address to the deceased, formulaic language, repetition, and prosodic modulation. These features align *gjama* with what folkloristic scholarship defines as *liminal discourse*—a mode of speech situated at the threshold between life and death, presence and absence, and the social and metaphysical (Arukask, 2011). The lamenter, positioned in close physical and symbolic proximity to the deceased, assumes the role of mediator, articulating grief while simultaneously reaffirming social and cosmological boundaries. Theoretical approaches to lamentation consistently emphasize its performative rather than purely textual nature. Meaning in lament is not exhausted by lexical content; rather, it is produced through the interaction of voice, rhythm, gesture, spatial arrangement, and audience participation. Rosenberg's (2004) analysis of Corsican *voceri* demonstrates that lamentation operates as a multimodal semiotic system in which linguistic utterances are inseparable from nonverbal vocalizations such as wailing, sobbing, and stylized cries.

These paralinguistic elements intensify the affective force of the lament and function as culturally legible signals of grief, authority, and authenticity. Comparative studies further suggest that lamentation prioritizes communal regulation over individual emotional release. Although laments articulate deeply personal loss, they do so through inherited linguistic and melodic structures that predate the individual performer. As Arukask (2011) argues, lament texts employ an “archaic language” shaped by centuries of cultural transmission, within which personal experience is refracted through collective symbolic codes. Consequently, lamentation may be more accurately conceptualized as a social technology for restoring disrupted cohesion and negotiating the perceived dangers associated with death, rather than as a therapeutic outlet in the modern psychological sense. This perspective gains additional depth when examined through a psycholinguistic lens. Lamentation engages language at the point where propositional meaning yields to affective and embodied expression. The breakdown of syntactic regularity, the prevalence of repetition, vocatives, and metaphor, and the reliance on formulaic phrases suggest that lament speech operates at the margins of ordinary linguistic processing. In this sense, lamentation activates what psycholinguistic theory describes as pre-reflective and emotionally driven modes of verbalization, in which language functions less to convey information than to externalize and structure intense emotional states. The lamenter’s voice thus becomes a cognitive instrument through which grief is not only expressed but also shaped and ritualized. Gender constitutes another central dimension of lamentation theory. Across multiple cultural contexts, women emerge as the primary custodians of lament traditions, a pattern extensively documented in Balto-Finnic, Mediterranean, and Balkan cultures (Arukask, 2011; Rosenberg, 2004). This gendered distribution reflects culturally assigned roles in managing death, memory, and emotional labor. Lamentation provides women with a socially authorized space to articulate loss, voice social tensions, and reaffirm communal values, thereby transforming personal sorrow into collective knowledge. In light of these theoretical considerations, *gjama* is approached in the present study as a culturally embedded, psycholinguistically charged, and performative practice. Conceptualized as the “voice of pain,” *gjama* reveals how grief is linguistically structured, ritualized, and aestheticized within a specific cultural tradition. By integrating anthropological, terminological, and psycholinguistic perspectives, this study argues that lamentation is not merely a reaction to death but a complex semiotic process through which societies give form, meaning, and continuity to human suffering.

## 2. Historical and geographical background of lamentation

Ritual lamentation for the dead constitutes one of the earliest and most persistent cultural responses to mortality, deeply embedded in the cosmological, social, and symbolic systems of ancient societies. Across civilizations, lamentation appears not as an unregulated emotional reaction but as a culturally codified practice through which grief is publicly articulated, social cohesion is restored, and the boundaries between the living and the dead are ritually negotiated. Comparative historical and ethnographic

research confirms that lamentation has functioned as a structured, performative language of loss since antiquity. One of the earliest literary attestations of ritualized lamentation appears in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dated to the late third millennium BCE. Gilgamesh's lament for Enkidu unfolds as an extended and embodied performance of grief, marked by loud cries, ritual gestures, bodily self-abasement, and the suspension of ordinary temporal rhythms. His refusal to accept consolation and his prolonged mourning transform personal loss into a public rupture, underscoring the social and cosmological significance of death (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1980). The episode illustrates lamentation as a performative act through which grief is externalized, ritualized, and endowed with symbolic meaning. A parallel configuration of lamentation appears in ancient Greek epic tradition. In Homer's *Iliad*, lamentation occupies a central role in representations of death and heroic loss. Achilles' lament for Patroclus exemplifies a culturally regulated response to bereavement, structured through formulaic speech, ritual gestures, and collective participation. As Rosenberg (2010) observes, Homeric laments function not merely as literary devices but as reflections of lived ritual practices, articulating grief at the intersection of individual emotion and communal values. Through lamentation, death becomes socially intelligible, and the memory of the deceased is integrated into a shared moral framework. Beyond Mesopotamian and Greek contexts, lamentation recurs across ancient European and Mediterranean cultures as a durable ritual form. Archaeological, folkloric, and literary evidence from Greek, Roman, Illyrian, and later Balto-Finnic traditions demonstrates that lamentation constituted a central component of funerary rites, often associated with inherited poetic formulas, gendered performance roles, and liminal ritual settings. Many of these practices originated in pre-Christian cosmologies and persisted through subsequent religious transformations without relinquishing their core ritual logic (Tappenden & Daniel-Hughes, 2017). In the Mediterranean and Balkan regions, lamentation developed into a distinctive oral-poetic genre characterized by direct address to the deceased, metaphors of journey and separation, and highly stylized melodic patterns. Ethnographic research emphasizes that the meaning of lamentation is produced not solely through verbal content but through performance elements such as vocal intensity, rhythm, repetition, and bodily movement (Patrikainen, 2023). These features reveal strong continuities between ancient epic expressions of grief and later vernacular traditions, suggesting a long historical continuum of ritualized mourning. Comparative research on Balto-Finnic and North Russian burial laments offers further insight into the social logic of lamentation. Arukask (2011) demonstrates that in these traditions lamentation functions primarily as a mediating practice between the realms of the living and the dead. Rather than privileging individual psychological catharsis, laments aim to restore disrupted social balance, manage the perceived danger of the dead, and reestablish symbolic boundaries. Lamentation thus operates as a communal technology of order, subordinating personal grief to broader cultural and cosmological concerns. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship underscores the embodied and multimodal character of lamentation. Silvonen and Stepanova (2020) argue that ritual laments constitute complex affective performances in which language, music, and bodily expression are inseparably

intertwined. In Karelian laments, emotion is not merely expressed but enacted through vocal timbre, melodic descent, rhythmic instability, and gestures associated with weeping. Such performances both reflect and intensify emotional states, transforming lament into a process that reshapes the experience of both mourner and community. The performative dimension of lamentation is equally evident in Southern European traditions. Research on Southern Italian lamentation demonstrates that ritual weeping operates as a codified repertoire of gestures and vocalizations transmitted across generations, often through imitation and reenactment rather than textual preservation (Schäuble, 2021). Drawing on visual and auditory ethnography, this scholarship shows how lamentation persists as a migratory cultural form, maintaining expressive power even when detached from its original ritual context. The recurrence of gestural and vocal patterns supports the view that lamentation functions as embodied cultural memory rather than solely as a verbal genre. The geographical breadth of lament traditions further highlights the central role of women as primary ritual performers. Across Mediterranean, Balkan, and Finno-Ugric contexts, lamentation is predominantly a female practice associated with ritual authority at moments of death and transition. As Robertson (2001) argues in her analysis of ancient Athenian lament, women's funeral laments constituted a powerful form of public speech, enabling them to "speak for the dead" while temporarily occupying a central rhetorical position within the community. This gendered dimension reinforces lamentation's status as a regulated yet potent mode of social expression. From a theoretical standpoint, the historical persistence of lamentation supports its interpretation as a trans-cultural phenomenon rooted in fundamental human responses to mortality. Performance-oriented and anthropological approaches emphasize that lamentation is always embedded within specific historical and geographic contexts, while simultaneously drawing upon symbolic structures that transcend individual cultures (Rosenberg, 2010; Wilce, 2009). Ancient epic laments and later ethnographically documented practices thus form part of a broader international constellation of mourning rituals through which societies articulate loss, negotiate liminality, and preserve cultural memory.

### **3. Gjama in Albanian culture as ritual lamentation and cultural continuity**

Within the broader international landscape of ritual lamentation, *Gjama* occupies a distinctive and emblematic place in Albanian cultural history as a deeply rooted and highly recognizable form of collective mourning, particularly among northern Albanian communities. More than a spontaneous vocal reaction to death, *Gjama* constitutes a ritualized response in which grief is externalized, structured, and socially coordinated through voice, gesture, movement, and collective participation. In doing so, it transforms individual loss into a shared cultural event, embedding personal sorrow within an inherited ceremonial framework that regulates emotional expression and reinforces communal cohesion.

Ethnographic and historical sources consistently describe *Gjama* as a predominantly male-performed funerary rite (*Gjama e burrave*), traditionally enacted in response

to the death of men associated with honor, bravery, or social authority. Joseph and Dedvukaj (2024) document the ritual as unfolding through a sequence of recognizable phases, characterized by synchronized bodily actions such as stamping the ground, striking the chest, and raising the hands toward the mouth or ear. These gestures are accompanied by prolonged, forceful vocal cries and formulaic exclamations, often including repeated invocation of the deceased's name. The highly codified nature of these actions underscores that *Gjama* is not improvised lamentation but a culturally regulated mode of expression, in which emotional intensity is both elicited and contained by ritual form.

From a performative perspective, the patterned coordination of voice and body aligns *Gjama* with what performance-oriented folkloristic research identifies as a marked communicative frame, in which ordinary speech is suspended and replaced by heightened, ritualized vocality and movement (Arukask, 2011). This ritual framing signals to participants and observers alike that the lament belongs to a distinct genre of expression, governed by inherited norms rather than individual choice. In this sense, *Gjama* functions as a socially authorized channel for grief, enabling mourners to articulate loss without destabilizing the moral and symbolic order of the community.



Figure 1: Practicing *Gjama*. Photo by Reiner Schulz in 1937 <http://www.albanianphotography.net/schulz/>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=99324899>

Historical accounts attest to the long-standing presence and social salience of *Gjama* in Albanian society. Marin Barleti's description of the mourning rituals following the death of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg in 1468 emphasizes the performative visibility of grief, noting loud lamentation, expressive bodily gestures, and broad communal participation (Barleti, 1504/1997). Barleti's account situates *Gjama* within a wider Mediterranean tradition of public mourning while simultaneously highlighting its locally specific gestural and vocal repertoire. The continuity of such descriptions across centuries suggests that *Gjama* has functioned as an established cultural medium through which death is rendered socially intelligible and symbolically manageable.



Figure 2: Reconstructed *Gjama* commemorating the death of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, performed in 2024 at Skanderbeg's tomb in Lezhë.

Archaeological evidence further reinforces the historical depth of this ritual form. A funerary stela discovered at the Dardanian site of Kamenica in present-day Kosovo, dated between the fifth and first centuries BCE, depicts a procession of mourners engaged in gestures that closely resemble those documented in later Albanian lament traditions. As Joseph and Dedvukaj (2024) observe, the raised arms, inclined bodies, and coordinated collective movement represented on the stela bear notable similarities to the embodied repertoire of *Gjama*, suggesting a continuity of ritual expression extending back to antiquity. Such visual evidence resonates with broader comparative archaeological and folkloric research emphasizing the persistence of embodied mourning gestures across time in the Balkan and Mediterranean regions (Arukask, 2011).



Figure 3: Stela of a funerary procession 500-100 BC (National Museum of Kosovo) <https://www.albanianinstitute.org/program/a-stela-from-the-ancient-dardana-fortress/>

From a linguistic perspective, the term *gjama* itself reflects the ritualized and performative nature of the practice. Joseph and Dedvukaj (2024) propose an etymological connection between *gjama* and a Proto-Indo-European root associated with “song” or heightened vocal expression, thereby foregrounding the centrality of voice as a ritual instrument. This interpretation aligns with broader ethnographic analyses of lamentation, which emphasize that ritual mourning is typically distinguished from everyday speech through patterned vocality, repetition, and heightened prosodic features (Arukask, 2011; Rosenberg, 2004). In *gjama*, vocal intensity, rhythmic coordination, and collective synchrony function not merely as expressions of emotion but as semiotic markers that delineate ritual time and ritual space. Recent scholarship further underscores the discursive and performative dimensions of Albanian lament traditions. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Spiri (2024) conceptualizes lamentation as a culturally authorized mode of expression in which grief is articulated through inherited verbal formulas and embodied gestures. From this perspective, *gjama* operates as a socially sanctioned channel through which loss may be voiced without destabilizing communal equilibrium. The ritual’s reliance on repetition, formulaic cries, and coordinated bodily movement reflects what comparative studies of lament genres identify as a defining structural feature: the prioritization of transmissible patterns over individual improvisation (Arukask, 2011; Schäuble, 2021). Although *gjama* is most visibly associated with male ritual performance in northern Albania, it exists alongside other Albanian mourning practices, including female-performed ritual weeping and domestic lamentation. Together, these practices constitute an integrated cultural system of mourning in which expressive roles are distributed according to gender, social context, and ritual setting. Comparative research on lament traditions in the Balkans and the Mediterranean consistently demonstrates that such differentiation does not fragment the mourning system but instead reinforces its collective function by accommodating multiple, complementary modes of emotional expression (Silvonen & Stepanova, 2020). The symbolic and cultural significance of *gjama* is further underscored by its suppression during the communist period, when the ritual was officially prohibited as incompatible with state ideology. As documented by Joseph and Dedvukaj (2024) and examined in detail by Spiri (2024), this prohibition disrupted the public performance of *gjama* without erasing it from cultural memory. Rather, the practice persisted in fragmented and indirect forms—through oral histories, private remembrance, and later scholarly documentation—demonstrating its resilience as a marker of collective identity and cultural continuity. In sum, *gjama* represents a central and symbolically charged form of Albanian ritual lamentation characterized by historical continuity, performative visibility, and deep cultural embedding. Its structured use of voice, gesture, and collective participation provides an essential foundation for understanding how mourning is culturally organized within Albanian society. At the same time, the patterned and embodied character of *gjama* gestures toward broader anthropological and psycholinguistic questions concerning ritualization, embodiment, and the social mediation of emotion, which will be addressed more explicitly in the analytical sections that follow.

#### 4. When Pain Becomes Language: Gjama and Laments as Social and Emotional Acts

*Gjama* and related lament forms function as paralinguistic modes of communication in which screams, vocal tremors, and rhythmic cries convey socially recognized meanings within the community. The prosody and rhythm of these vocalizations are not merely spontaneous expressions of pain but culturally structured codes that activate biological mechanisms of emotional perception and enable both individuals and their surrounding social networks to process loss collectively. Through patterned vocal intensity and repetition, private grief is transformed into a shared communicative act. From a psycholinguistic perspective, vocalizations of pain—including screams and voice tremors—operate as culturally mediated vocal signals that transmit emotion and social meaning. These vocal forms function as affective bridges, facilitating emotional alignment among participants in ritual contexts. Their communicative force lies not primarily in lexical content but in prosodic modulation, rhythm, pitch variation, and timbre, which listeners interpret as socially intelligible signs of grief. An anthropological framework further clarifies this communicative dimension. Clifford Geertz (1973) conceptualized culture as a “web of significance” and argued that social practices can be interpreted as texts composed of layered meanings. Within this interpretive paradigm, rituals and collective emotional displays may be “read” as symbolic forms of communication, even when they do not rely on conventional verbal discourse. What is encountered in such practices is not merely social mechanics but social semantics—shared systems of meaning through which communities understand themselves.

From this perspective, cultural forms can be treated as symbolic constructions generated from social experience. Ritual lamentation, including *gjama*, constitutes one such construction: a patterned ensemble of vocal and bodily signs through which grief is structured, interpreted, and transmitted. These performances are not spontaneous emotional eruptions but culturally regulated speech acts embedded within a collectively recognized system of signs. As Geertz (1973) emphasizes through the method of “thick description,” anthropological analysis must attend not only to observable actions but also to the meanings that render those actions intelligible within a given cultural framework.

Accordingly, *gjama* and related laments may be approached as semiotic and emotional structures in which voice, gesture, and rhythm converge to produce socially meaningful expressions of loss. The following analysis examines the constitutive elements of these practices in order to clarify how lamentation achieves both cultural specificity and broader communicative resonance in the articulation of grief.

##### 4.1. *Gjama* and Lament as Emotional “Speech Acts”

*Gjama* and related lament forms function as nonverbal speech acts insofar as emotion is transmitted through vocal structure even in the absence of articulated words. Listeners are able to perceive, interpret, and retain this emotional information, rendering lamentation an effective mechanism for the collective processing of loss (Filippa et al.,

2022). Laments characterized by distinctive tonality, rhythm, and repetition demonstrate that emotional prosody is not merely biological but cultural: it gives form to emotional experience and contributes to the maintenance of social order within the community. Even without lexical clarity, vocal outbursts accompanied by gestures such as chest beating communicate socially intelligible declarations. Through these embodied acts, the mourner implicitly conveys meanings such as suffering for the deceased, recognition of the deceased's value, and affirmation of belonging to a kinship group. As Clifford Geertz (1973) argued, pain does not remain a private sensation but serves moral and social communication, allowing individuals to situate suffering within shared systems of meaning.

Ethnographic documentation of Albanian *gjama* and lament practices illustrates the diversity of vocal forms through which such meanings are conveyed. These include prolonged screams punctuated by pauses and accompanied by forceful chest beating; rhythmic group cries characterized by synchronized vocalization; formulaic phrases such as invocations of the deceased ("Oh daughter!"; "my soul, my light!"); imitative cries resembling animal sounds (e.g., *ku... ku...*, associated with the cuckoo); and repetitive refrains (*ej, ej; medet, medet*) performed collectively during men's *gjama* (Kondi, 2012). Women may join laments as a vocal chorus through repetitive syllabic sounds, while men often sustain continuous cries marked by rhythmic intensity.

Verbal lament texts further reinforce the communicative function of these performances. Lament verses documented in Albanian sources frequently consist of short, repetitive structures with high emotional density, as in the following example:

"Wretched am I for you, o brother! ûûû!!

Wretched am I, Mark Zeçja,

Wretched am I today for you, Mark Zeçja,

For your dark news" (Pllumi, 2006).

Other laments are structured as direct communication with the deceased, urging response or symbolic return, as in ritualized appeals made at the graveside (Kondi, 2006). Still others are built around rhetorical questions that articulate loss through absence, kinship, and disrupted domestic order ("Who will call me 'mother'?"). These textual features reveal a consistent preference for simple syntactic structures, minimal conjunction use, and strong reliance on repetition and apostrophic address. Such formal simplicity enhances adaptability to emotional intonation and allows the lament to be shaped dynamically by vocal intensity.

Across both verbal and nonverbal dimensions, *gjama* and laments employ figurative language, rhythmic repetition, and apostrophic calls that transform individual grief into a collective communicative performance. Phonetic and metaphorical elements work together to render emotional experience audible, visible, and socially shared. Screams, groans, prolonged vowels, and vocal tremors recur throughout lament performances, accompanied by fluctuations in pitch, rhythm, and intensity that together produce what may be described as a "melody of pain." High pitch typically signals intense emotion and reverence for the deceased, synchronized rhythm unites participants and structures collective expression, and vocal tremor conveys emotional depth irrespective

of semantic content. In this sense, emotional information is often transmitted more through *how* something is voiced than through *what* is verbally articulated.

These observations align closely with psycholinguistic theories of emotional expression. Klaus R. Scherer's (1986) component process model conceptualizes emotion as a coordinated system involving cognitive appraisal, physiological response, subjective experience, and expressive behavior, particularly vocal and facial expression. Lamentation activates all of these components simultaneously. Strong emotions reliably alter vocal parameters, producing prolonged vowels, tremors, and intensified cries that are perceptually salient to listeners.

The remarkable historical stability of *gjama* and related lament forms can thus be understood as a consequence of this interaction between physiological response and culturally learned expressive norms. Because these vocal signals reliably evoke empathic and emotional reactions, they facilitate the social sharing and regulation of grief. From this perspective, *gjama* and laments constitute intensified forms of emotional vocal communication in which physiological, linguistic, and cultural systems converge, transforming pain into a collectively meaningful experience.

#### 4.2 Linguistic Formulas

In *gjama* and related lament traditions, performers rely on ready-made linguistic formulas to express intensely personal emotions through collectively recognized patterns of speech. These formulas demonstrate that culture provides preexisting models for structuring emotional expression, enabling grief to be communicated in socially intelligible ways (Duranti, 1997). By linking emotion to social roles and situational context, these formulas establish shared expectations regarding when, how, and with what intensity feelings may be expressed.

Lexical examples include metaphoric or relational expressions such as "light of the house," "mother's arm," "fire in the hearth," "plucked flower," and direct addresses to kin such as "Oh daughter..." Similarly, rhetorical questions and formulaic sentence structures, including constructions like "Who has...?," "Where did you leave...?," and "Why did...?," are routinely employed to structure lamentation. Pragmatic formulas—calls such as "Oh son," "Oh daughter," or "O my boy"—serve multiple social and emotional functions: they preserve the relationship with the deceased, express relational closeness, and actively engage listeners emotionally.

Repetition is another defining feature of these formulas. For instance, a lamenter may repeat a phrase such as "Where did you leave... where did you leave..." or "Who will... who will..." creating a rhythm reminiscent of the heavy breathing that occurs during crying. This repetition is not arbitrary; it functions as a regulatory mechanism for the nervous system, gradually releasing emotional tension and facilitating self-soothing through the voice. Vocalized emotional sounds activate neural circuits associated with empathy, vigilance, and social connection, eliciting immediate recognition and response from listeners.

Importantly, these lexical and syntactic formulas are not spontaneous individual inventions. Rather, they are culturally sanctioned patterns that are immediately

recognizable by participants, imbued with shared emotional meanings, and capable of transforming personal pain into communicable social experience. As such, lamentation is both a spontaneous emotional expression and a structured cultural performance. The persistence of these formulas is rooted in folk wisdom. In moments of intense grief, individuals often struggle to generate novel verbal expressions due to cognitive and emotional overload, confusion, or numbing. Traditional formulas such as “*Oj bijë...*” or “*Kush ma fiku dritën...*” serve as pre-established cognitive scaffolds, providing mental frameworks that assist in articulating pain, releasing emotional tension, and achieving a sense of relief. By offering a familiar structure, these formulas render grief more bearable and mitigate the internal chaos of overwhelming loss.

## 5. Processing Emotions Through Language

### 5.1 The Individual Experiencing Grief and Pain

Folk wisdom often guides behavior in unconscious ways, and ready-made formulas—such as advice passed down from elders—serve as vital mechanisms for coping with grief, a topic long examined in anthropology. A common adage in Albanian mourning traditions advises: “If you are in mourning, in the midst of pain, cry and release it, and you will feel better.” Contemporary psycholinguistic research provides a scientific basis for such centuries-old practices.

Psycholinguistics examines the individual as a cognitive and emotional being and considers how language, affective states, and expressive capacities interact. Scholars in this field have argued that vocal expression of emotion facilitates coping with pain, making it more manageable and easing psychological suffering. According to Mauchand and Pell (2025), pain is not solely an internal experience; when it is externalized publicly, it mobilizes social and neurological support systems that assist the individual in regulating distress.

Empirical studies on detecting pain through vocal signals further substantiate this claim. Vocalizations of pain—such as crying, moaning, or wailing—are strongly associated with the subjective experience of pain, providing an observable and communicable index of emotional state (Helmer et al., 2020). Research on emotional prosody emphasizes that variations in tone, rhythm, and intensity during speech are critical for transmitting affective information to others. Such vocal patterns activate neural networks related to emotional perception and empathy, enhancing both individual regulation and communal recognition of suffering (Mauchand et al., 2024). Positive responses from listeners can trigger the release of neurotransmitters, including oxytocin, which reduces stress and strengthens social bonds.

In this way, pain becomes both public and structured. Laments such as *gjama* are not solely personal expressions; they function as collective mechanisms through which grief is socially processed. Drawing on Turner’s (1969) analysis, *gjama* and related vocal lamentation practices act as culturally sanctioned instruments of emotional regulation. Through patterned vocal formulas and shared performative gestures, pain is articulated in a socially intelligible form that simultaneously supports individual coping and

communal cohesion. By making grief publicly visible and ritualized, these practices mobilize social, cognitive, and neurological resources, demonstrating the intersection of folk wisdom, cultural tradition, and psycholinguistic function.

### 5.2 *The Listener's Experience of Pain*

We naturally understand our own grief and tears following the loss of a loved one, but the sadness experienced during a funeral for distant acquaintances—or even as a mere observer—is more difficult to describe. Unconsciously, we often empathize with the pain of others. This raises important questions: what occurs within us in these moments, and what mechanisms enable us to feel another's suffering?

To address these questions, it is necessary to analyze how crying, *gjama*, and lamentation function as messages that listeners must decode. The basic elements of prosody—intonation, rhythm, stress, and the lengthening of sounds—play a central role. Psycholinguistic research demonstrates that the combination of these features transforms linguistic messages into carriers of emotion, extending meaning beyond words. Acoustic and perceptual attributes enhance the expressive function of vocalized grief, facilitating the elicitation of empathy in listeners (Mauchand et al., 2024).

In *gjama*, men's wails, voice tremors, and the rhythm of calls are not merely expressions of individual pain; they encode socially recognized meanings, including honor, nobility, and communal loss. In this context, *gjama* may be understood as a culturally recognized "vocal code" that engages biological mechanisms of emotional perception and enables the collective processing of grief (Geertz, 1973).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the vocal expressions in *gjama* constitute emotional prosody, in which pitch, rhythm, and intensity convey deep affective states even in the absence of explicit semantic content. Variations in intonation, rhythmic patterning, and vocal intensity allow listeners to perceive emotion directly from the voice (Filippa et al., 2022; Grandjean & Lima, 2003). Neurolinguistic evidence supports this interpretation, showing that processing emotional prosody activates specific brain structures—particularly in the right temporal lobe—highlighting a neurological substrate for emotional perception. Prosodic cues influence not only immediate perception but also memory and long-term processing of affective information (Grandjean & Lima, 2003). Mauchand, Armony, and Pell (2024) reported fMRI findings indicating that vocal expressions of pain activate brain regions associated with emotional perception and empathy, suggesting that the act of vocalizing suffering modulates how observers respond to another person's distress. Additional studies on listener perception confirm that acoustic characteristics of the voice, such as intensity, pitch, and nonlinear vocal phenomena, are strongly correlated with subjective evaluations of pain (Valente et al., 2025). Vocalizations exhibiting higher intensity, elevated pitch, or nonlinear features are consistently perceived as more intense signals of suffering.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the experience of another's pain—whether through *gjama* or other forms of vocal lamentation—is mediated by specialized auditory and cognitive mechanisms. Emotional vocalizations function as highly effective social communication tools, triggering immediate perception, empathy, and coordinated

emotional response among listeners. In this sense, the pain expressed in ritual lamentation is simultaneously personal, social, and neurologically resonant.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that laments and *gjama* are not merely spontaneous expressions of pain, but structured and universal forms of symbolic, emotional, and social communication. They operate as nonverbal speech acts in which the voice—through intensity, pitch, rhythm, tremor, and vowel lengthening—functions as a semantic instrument, conveying meaning intelligible to the community. Pain is articulated not only through lexical content but also through prosody, which engages both biological and cultural mechanisms of emotional perception.

Within Albanian tradition, *gjama* and laments can be “read” as cultural texts through which society communicates meaning about itself via ritualized performance. These practices transmit social semantics as much as they express affective states, illustrating that mourning is embedded within collective systems of understanding rather than merely individual emotional mechanics. In this sense, Albanian mourning culture constitutes an ensemble of living texts, enabling individuals to recognize themselves, their relationships, and their cultural roots through participatory ritual.

Analysis of laments and *gjama* indicates that the emotion conveyed in these performances arises from a coordinated process involving cognitive appraisal, physiological response, and vocal expression. These practices exemplify the interplay between physiological and linguistic systems, demonstrating how the two are intertwined to produce a complex, intense, and socially legible form of emotional communication.

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