

Thoughts on Kosovar Albanian Literature, Culture and Identity

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A few years ago, I was asked by a Prishtina journalist, with the television cameras rolling in front of me, whether there was a Kosovar identity. I do not recall exactly what I answered, but I do remember that it caused shock waves. The Albanians of Kosova were and are understandably obsessed with issues relating to their ethnic and national identity. They knew what they were not. They never liked to be called Yugoslavs, though for decades they had Yugoslav passports and benefited from freedoms which people in Albania itself could only have dreamed of. And they were certainly not Serbs, though much of the world regarded their country simply as a province of Serbia, indeed some still do. But what are they then? Are they simply Albanians, i.e. the same people as the inhabitants of the Republic of Albania, or are they Kosovar Albanians, a special breed? Confusion over this matter gave rise before and during the Kosova War to the rather denigrating term “ethnic Albanian.” I say “denigrating” because the term was imposed upon the Kosovar Albanians from outside and was used almost universally during and after the war, whereas the equivalent term “ethnic Serb” for the Serb inhabitants of Kosova never really took hold, thus implicitly suggesting that the country was, indeed, simply part of Serbia.

In the years of struggle on the part of the Kosovar Albanians for the right to be Albanian, talk of a specific Kosovar identity was very much taboo. In the political context of the period, it was seen as tantamount to driving a wedge between the Albanians in Kosova and those in Albania, thus dividing and weakening the Albanian nation to the benefit of an expansive Serbia.

The Kosovars are particularly sensitive to the subject, not least because of intrigues by the one-time Communist authorities in Belgrade. In order to maintain its rule over a region which was not primarily Serb-inhabited, Belgrade fostered two different terms in the Serbian language to refer to the Albanians: the *Albanci*, being the inhabitants of the Republic of Albania, and the *Šiptari*, a word not without negative connotations, being the Albanian-speaking inhabitants of Kosova and the rest of former Yugoslavia. Official circles in Belgrade had deftly divided one ethnic group into two, in an attempt to stifle any latent desire for reunification between the two.

The Western world only really discovered the Albanians in the 1990s as a result of the Yugoslav wars and ethnic conflicts, and of the 1997 uprising in Albania. Newspapers and television reports at the time presented the Albanians in two varieties, not Ghegs and Tosks, that is, northern Albanians and southern Albanians, as dialectologists and ethnographers are wont to divide them, but in actual Albanians and in Kosovar or “ethnic” Albanians.

Issues of identity, and national identity in particular, are complex and it is certainly not the aim of this paper to pronounce definitive judgment on the matter. Are the Kosovars the same people as the inhabitants of the Republic of Albania? Superficially, of course, they are. They are basically of the same ethnicity; they speak the same language, despite substantial dialect differences; and they hold a certain community of values. They thus share most of the basic attributes of what constitutes a nation. Anthony D. Smith defined this as follows: “A human

group sharing (usually by birth) an historical territory, common myths and historical memories, often a common language, a mass public common culture, a perception of threat and common legal rights and duties for all members.”¹ Yet, if we are to seek a fuller answer to this question, it must be what the Germans would call *jein*, that is, yes and no.

In his book *In Search of Greater Albania*, BBC analyst Paulin Kola comes to the conclusion that “having been at the receiving end of repeated invasions by countries more powerful than themselves, the Albanians remained fragmented and unable to establish a unifying central authority that would command their collective allegiance.”²

Albania, in the ethnic sense of territory in southeastern Europe inhabited primarily by the Albanians, was united for about five centuries as part of the Ottoman Empire. With the final collapse of the moribund empire in the First Balkan War of 1912-1913, Kosova, which had an Albanian majority population at the time, was invaded and conquered by the Serb Third Army under King Petar I Karadjordjević. Albania itself, in the current political sense, had rather chaotically declared its independence in November 1912 and managed to gain international recognition at the Conference of London in the summer of 1913. Since that time, the Albanians have been living in two different states - more accurately one might say six different states because there are also substantial Albanian communities in Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Greece. But let us focus on the two entities where the Albanians were the absolute majority in 1913 and have remained so to the present day.

From the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second World War, Albanian culture evolved in two different worlds. In this period, and in particular during the reign of King Zog, the Albanians of the motherland managed, somewhat sluggishly, to develop a solid national culture, primitive though it may have been by European standards. The Kosovar Albanians for their part were subjected in the 1920s and 1930s to an unprecedented level of ethnic discrimination as unwanted guests in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and were unable to advance politically or culturally. Public use of the Albanian language in Kosova was just as forbidden in what evolved into Yugoslavia as it had been in the Ottoman Empire, and Albanian-language school education was banned, too. The brief reunification of Albania and Kosova under the auspices of Fascist Italy during the Second World War did bring some relief. An ephemeral Albanian-language administration was created, elementary and secondary schools were opened and a number of young Kosovars received scholarships to study abroad. If many Kosovars welcomed Italian and German occupation, it was certainly not because of any innate love of Fascism. It was simply because, for most people, Italian and German occupation was infinitely preferable to Serb occupation... which says a lot about the latter. Be this as it may, Kosova returned to Serb rule after the Second World War and was encompassed, against the will of the majority of its population, into socialist Yugoslavia, where it remained until the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. There was, it must be noted, a short period in 1946 and 1947 when a modicum

¹ in Alfred Cobban, *National Self-Determination*. London: Oxford University Press 1945, p. 49-52.

² Paulin Kola, *The Search for Greater Albania*. London: Hurst and Company, 2003, p. 383.

of contact between Albania and Kosova existed. Plans were underway at the time for a political merger not only of Albania and Kosova, but of Albania and Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav dinar was introduced as the national currency of Albania, and BCS (Serbo-Croatian) was made compulsory in all Albanian schools. However, the political situation changed radically with the split between Tito and Stalin, and with Enver Hoxha's decision to ally his country firmly with Stalinist Russia. From the summer of 1948 to the 1990s, the border between Albania and Kosova was hermetically sealed. The Berlin Wall was, by comparison, a sieve. Kosova Albanians were still being imprisoned for visiting Albania without a Serb "exit visa" as late as 1998.

The obvious result of this imposed division and long period of separation between Albania and Kosova was a cultural dichotomy, the creation of two different Albanian cultures, and, one might almost postulate, two different Albanian nations. The isolationist regime in Albania, faithful for almost half a century to Stalin's primitive and inhumane system, wiped out the middle class in the late 1940s and achieved nothing over the following decades but economic and cultural stagnation. The population lived in ignorance, fear and misery. In material terms, they were deprived of all but the bare essentials needed to stay alive. Indeed one can do little but marvel at how they managed to survive as a people at all. Most aspects of traditional Albanian culture were done away with, in particular in the 1960s. Decades of Communist revolution, purges and terror destroyed virtually everything Albania had once been. Even today, Albania is still largely a victim of the decades of social and cultural isolation it suffered from the rest of the world. Needless to say, the population of Albania had no time or energy to give a thought to Kosova. For most of those with no close family ties, Kosova was somewhere behind the moon.

Kosova for its part, while always the poorhouse of Yugoslavia, made some economic progress and by the 1970s had attained a certain degree of prosperity - in modest Albanian terms. However, with the exception of the years 1974 to 1981, Kosovar society was under constant and mostly destructive pressure from Serbia, politically and culturally, and, as such, withdrew into itself, remaining hermetic and traditional.

The Kosovar Albanians knew little about what was going on in Stalinist Albania. It was the country of their dreams, their hopes and their aspirations, and there was no place in these dreams for reality. They naively regarded their lot as worse than that of the motherland and were devastated in the late 1990s when they were forced to accept the fact that they had fared much better under Serbia than their brethren had under Enver Hoxha.

When the first contacts between the two halves of the Albanian nation finally occurred in the early 1990s, they were coloured by much prejudice. Some of the first Kosovars to arrive in Tirana were carpet-baggers from Western Europe, there to make a quick buck. Though they helped introduce a free market economy, they also introduced corruption and crime. They were viewed as foreign by the local Albanians who reacted with shock and hostility at the new capitalist goings-on. It is no exaggeration to state that in the first half of the 1990s, Kosovar Albanians were much more welcome in Belgrade than they were in Tirana. Even the substantial communities of Albanian emigrants that arose in western Europe remained staunchly divided. Albanians from Albania and Albanians from Kosova did not mix publicly or privately, and encountered one another most often with latent or open hostility. In the 1990s, there was certainly not one Albanian identity, but two.

The turning point came in the spring of 1999 when about half a million Kosovars, expelled from their burning homes, sought refuge in neighbouring Albania. Though Albania was still very poor and backward, and the people were not overly predisposed to receiving “asylum-seekers,” they took the Kosovars in as best they could. It was thus in the months between March and June 1999 that the Albanians finally got to know one another and, despite major misunderstandings - both linguistic and cultural - began to realise that they were one nation. Since that time, with the open border, Albanians have been growing together. Contacts - cultural, political, economic and individual - have flourished as never before in the history of the Albanian nation. Despite this, two distinct identities were cemented by the tortuous course of Albanian history, and they will no doubt continue to exist for some time.

These two distinct identities are well reflected in Albanian literature or, if you will, Albanian literatures. Some observers have asked the question: is Kosovar Albanian literature a branch of Albanian literature or is it to be regarded as a literature in its own right?

Whatever the taxonomic discussion may yield, it is evident that Albanian literature was late to develop in Kosova. Because of the country’s traumatic political and social history, it was not until the 1960s that the Albanian language came to be used on a widespread basis for creative writing. Literature there arose to a great extent on its own and not as an evolution of contemporary literature in Albania.

The first generation of serious prose writers in Kosova arrived in the late fifties, but was politically silenced by the Serb authorities. Of the authors of this generation, Adem Demaçi (b. 1936) was imprisoned in 1959, Martin Camaj (b. 1925) emigrated to Italy, Agim Gjakova (b. 1935) and Kapllan Resuli (b. 1935) fled to Stalinist Albania, much to their subsequent regret, Ramadan Rexhepi (b. 1940) fled to Sweden, and, perhaps the most promising authors, Anton Pashku (b. 1938) and Azem Shkreli (b. 1938), fell silent. Not long thereafter, however, policies liberalized and the Yugoslav State began allowing, indeed promoting literature in Albanian for the rising generation of educated Kosovars. Not only was this literature a normal consequence of the liberalization and political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s, Belgrade also recognized a political need for a native Kosovar Albanian literature as a means of anchoring the Kosovars within their country, i.e. the Yugoslavia federation. For obvious political reasons, it strove to promote a Yugoslav Albanian culture, which would be independent of and serve as an alternative to that of Enver Hoxha’s Albania.

Despite the emotional attachment many Kosovar Albanian had to Albania, or rather to the idealized Albania of their dreams, there was little concrete cultural leadership to be had from Tirana. In the decades following the rift between Tito and Hoxha, very few books made their way over the border from Albania, and those that did, were largely unreadable partisan drivel, hardly shining examples of literary creativity for the first generation of educated Kosovars. A new tradition had to be created, not only for political reasons, but also because there was no literary heritage on which to fall back. The modest written culture that had evolved in Albania in the first half of the twentieth century had been virtually wiped out by the Stalinist regime. Most of the nation’s traditional writers had been murdered, imprisoned or had fled the country.

With the opening of the University of Prishtina in 1970, the rapid rise of the Rilindja Publishing Company, and the broad measure of cultural and political autonomy granted under

the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974, Albanian literature in Kosova suddenly flourish as never before. Indeed one can speak of a swift literary zenith in the 1970s and 1980s, at least in terms of the quantity and variety of books published.

To return to my earlier question: “is Kosovar Albanian literature a branch of Albanian literature or is it to be regarded as a literature in its own right?”, the most objective answer would be that it is both. Its position is rather similar to that of Austrian literature within the context of German literature, of Latin American literature as part of Spanish literature, or of French Canadian literature as a constituent element of French literature. There is no real contradiction. Kosovar Albanian literature is Albanian literature, no more and no less than the literature of the Republic of Albania, yet it evolved in a very Kosovar environment, and for the most part with a Kosovar focus and *Weltanschauung*, that is to say, a Kosovar identity.

It has often been remarked that Kosovar literature is not read or even widely known in Albania. In earlier years this was due to its inaccessibility. Rare were Kosovar publications that reached readers in Tirana. Since the fall of the dictatorship(s) and the liberation of Kosova, books have been circulating freely and are subject to no more customs restrictions than milk or soap or other commodities. Nonetheless, Kosovar literature has not been able to penetrate the Tirana book market to any substantial extent. Southern Albanian readers have often complained that Kosovar use of the Albanian language in its current standardized form lacks literary sophistication and refinement. This should come as no surprise in view of the substantial difference between the native dialect of most Kosovars and the standard literary language, which is based to about 80% on southern Albanian. Kosovars write in what some of them have jokingly referred to as a foreign language, and are confronted with the same difficulties that Swiss writers have when they write books in standard German. Language usage is, however, only one aspect of the problem. The other side of the coin is the said Kosovar focus and identity, which is simply beyond the sphere of experience and interest of most readers in Albania.

In the field of creative literature, Kosova - with about forty percent of the total Albanian population in the Balkans - represents only ten to fifteen percent of the book market in terms of sales. It is thus proportionately far behind Albania itself, and this is certainly not due alone to the lingering reticence of Tirana readers to buy books from Kosova.

With Kosova having gained independence as a new European State, it is essential that more be done to make Kosovar literature and culture known, not only to Albania, but also to the outside world. Whatever be the evolution of Kosovar identity in the coming years, whether it consolidates and flourishes with the independence of Kosova as a national identity for the second Albanian-language State in Europe, or whether it mingles with that of Albania to create a pan-Albanian identity with many regional variations, it is very important that this identity, this culture and its literature be understood.

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