

## Some Observations on Albanian and Bosnian Epic Traditions

From an international perspective, the Albanian epic is the product of a little-known culture and a difficult, rarely studied language. As such, it has remained in the shadow of the Serbo-Croatian, or more properly, Bosnian Muslim epic, with which it has undeniable affinities.

It was the Homeric scholar Milman Parry (1902-1935) and his assistant Albert Lord (1912-1991) from Harvard University who captured the imagination of a whole generation of scholars with their discovery of illiterate bards in Bosnia and the Sanjak who, in true Homeric fashion, were able to recite epic verse for hours on end. After an initial visit to Yugoslavia in 1933, Parry returned to the Balkans for a longer stay from June 1934 to September 1935, this time with his assistant Albert Lord. During their stay in Bosnia, Hercegovina, Montenegro and the Sandjak of Novi Pazar, they recorded 12,500 texts, many of which were preserved as sound recordings on aluminium disks. This material formed the basis for their two-volume seminal publication *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* (Cambridge MA & Belgrade 1954, 1953).

Interestingly enough, four out of the five singers whose songs appear in this volume were Albanians: Salih Ugljanin, Djemal Zogić, Sulejman Makić and Alija Fjuljanin. These singers from Novi Pazar in the Sanjak were willing and able to reproduce the same epic songs in Bosnian (Serbo-Croatian) and Albanian. In 1937, after the untimely death of Parry, Albert Lord returned to the Balkans by himself, began learning Albanian and travelled through the Albanian highlands, where he collected a substantial corpus of Albanian heroic verse, now preserved in the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard University. Of this undertaking, he wrote:

“While in Novi Pazar, Parry had recorded several Albanian songs from one of the singers who sang in both languages. The musical instrument used to accompany these songs is the *gusle* (Albanian *lahuta*) but the line is shorter than the Serbian decasyllabic and a primitive type of rhyming is regular. It was apparent that a study of the exchange of formulas and traditional passages between these two poetries would be rewarding because it would show what happens when oral poetry passes from one language group to another which is adjacent to it. However, there was not sufficient time in 1935 to collect much material or to learn the Albanian language. While in Dubrovnik in the summer of 1937, I had an opportunity to study Albanian and in September and October of that year I travelled through the mountains of northern Albania from Shkodra to Kukësi by way of Boga, Thethi, Abat and Tropoja, returning by a more southerly route. I collected about one hundred narrative songs, many of them short, but a few between five hundred and a thousand lines in length. We found out that there are some songs common to both Serbo-Croatian and Albanian tradition and that a number of the Moslem heroes of the Yugoslav poetry, such as Mujo and Halil Hrnjica and Đerđelez Alija, are found also in Albanian. Much work remains to be done in this field before we can tell exactly what the relationship is between the two traditions.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Homer, Parry and Huso,’ in: *American Journal of Archeology* 52.1 (1948), p. 43. Reprinted in: *The Making of Homeric Verse, The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Ed. Adam Parry (Oxford 1981), p. 477.

Despite the wealth of material which has now been published in Albanian in Prishtina, Tirana and elsewhere, the language barrier has prevented the Albanian epic from becoming known to the international public. As such, international attention has been focussed almost exclusively on the Bosnian epic.

A few introductory monographs have, nonetheless, appeared in English on the Albanian epic. *Albanian and South Slavic Oral Epic Poetry* (Philadelphia 1954, New York 1969) by Stavro Skendi (1905-1989) provides a sufficient overview but is obviously outdated. Skendi's contact with the Albanian epic was, I believe, limited. *Albanian Folk Verse, Structure and Genre* (Munich 1978) by the late Arshi Pipa (1920-1997), and *The Bilingual Singer, a Study of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic Traditions* (New York 1990) by John Kolsti (b. 1935) of the University of Texas at Austin concentrate primarily on the metrics and structure of the epics and do not delve to any great extent into the cultural and historical context of the songs and singers. My bilingual edition of the Albanian epics entitled *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Këngë Kreshnikesh, Albanian Epic Verse in a Bilingual English-Albanian Edition* (Wauconda, Illinois 2004) is the first major translation of the material into English. I am delighted to hear that Gjekë Marinaj (b. 1965) and Frederick Turner (b. 1943) of the University of Texas in Dallas have currently prepared a collection of Albanian folk verse in English that will include some of the epic and heroic material. Still of use, of course, are the German-language *Die Volksepik der Albaner* (Halle 1958) by Maximilian Lambertz (1882-1963), which offers a German translation of the songs with a philological commentary, and the Italian-language works of Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) such as *Poesia popolare albanese* (Florence 1957). There are also French-language translations of the epic songs done in Tirana in the volumes *Chansonnier des preux albanais* (Paris 1967) published by Zihni Sako and *Trésor du chansonnier populaire albanais* (Tirana 1975), translated by Kolë Luka.

The Bosnian epic, as a living tradition, seems to have died out since the days of Parry and Lord. There are no more illiterate singers to be found in the coffee houses of Novi Pazar or Bijelo Polje and there is no one able to carry on the tradition of southern Slavic oral epic verse. The Albanian epic, however, to many people's surprise, is still alive and kicking. Even since the dawn of the twenty-first century, one can still find a good number of *lahutars* in Kosovo, in particular in the Rugova highlands west of Peja, and in northern Albania, as well as some rare souls in Montenegro, who are able to sing and recite the heroic deeds of Mujo and Halili and their thirty Agas. These are singers who have inherited their repertoires as part of an unbroken oral tradition passed down from generation to generation. One can safely assume that these elderly men constitute the very last traditional native singers of epic verse in Europe!

Much has been written about the antiquity and origins of Albanian epic verse and about its relationship to the Bosnian epic. From the narrative and for other reasons, there is general consensus nowadays that the Songs of the Frontier Warriors crystallized in the 17th and 18th centuries in the border region of the Balkans which separated Christendom from the Islamic world, though some much older strata are present in the songs. We are dealing, as such, primarily with a literary reflection of the *Türkenkriege* between the Ottoman Empire and the Hapsburgs. Our heroes are Muslim rebels living in the *krahina* who delight in crossing the mountains to go raiding in the *krajli*, the Kingdom of the Christians, and in outwitting the 'king' and his Slavic

warriors.

The place names referred to in the songs have been identified as being in and around the Lika and Krbava valleys to the east of Zadar in Croatia, not far from the present Bosnian border. *Jutbina*, the residence of Mujo and Halili, is the small town of Udbina on the road leading from the Plitvica Lakes down towards Zadar. It is situated at the southern end of the Krbava Valley. *Klladusha*, the home of Gjeto Basho Mujo, is Velika Kladuša, a town 35 kilometres southeast of Karlovac, and home of the onetime strongman Fikret Abdić (b. 1939). It is situated in the Bihać region, in the northwestern tip of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Sinja* is the small Adriatic port of Senj situated between Rijeka and Zadar. It was a bastion of the guerrilla fighters and pirates known as the *uskoci* who put up fierce resistance to Ottoman forces. *Zahara* could very well be Zadar, modern Albanian and Italian Zara.

The toponym New Kotor (Alb. *Kotorri i Ri*) is particularly interesting. One would immediately associate it with the Bay of Kotor in Montenegro, which would be much closer to Albanian territory, but much farther south than the other toponyms in Dalmatia. However, Albanian-American scholar Stavro Skendi skilfully identified New Kotor as Ravni Kotari or Flat Kotar, a range of hills 15 kilometres to the east of Zadar, home of a very good Dalmatian wine. The BCS word *ravni* (flat) was seemingly associated by the Albanian singers with the Albanian word *i ri*, plur. *të rinj* (new), thus giving New Kotor.

Among other toponyms in the Albanian songs that find their equivalents in the Bosnian versions are:

Lugje të Verdha	(Zeleni Lugovi)
Gurret e Bardha	(Beli izvori, Beli kamenje)
Podrume të Jutbinës	(Udbinski podrumi)
Bjeshkët e shkreta	(Jadne planine)

Even the protagonists of our Albanian songs find their parallels in the Bosnian material. The above-mentioned Albanian Gjeto Basho Mujo or Muji and Sokol Halili are the Četobaša Mujo (= Mustafa, leader of the *çeta*) and Halil Hrnjica in the Slavic versions. Mujo and Halili seem to be based on historical figures. A German-language document written in Karlovac on 20 November 1641, which contains a list of place names and Muslim rebels, seems clearly to refer to them.<sup>2</sup> I quote:

“*Von Gross Kladuscha, da am maisten tschettiert würdet: der Haram-Bassa Mustaffa, dess Hernizo Brueder, sonsten Khasslitschitsch Musstaffa genandt.*”

(“From Greater Kladusha, where the *çeta* groups are most prevalent: Mustafa Harambasha and his brother Hrnjico, otherwise known as Mustafa Haslichich”)

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<sup>2</sup> Dragutin Mićović: “Severnoarbaraške i srpskohrvatske desetaračke junačke narodne pesme.” in: *Stanovništvo slovenskog porijekla u Albaniji. Zbornik radova sa međunarodnog naučnog skupa održanog na Cetinju, 21, 22 i 23. juna 1990. godine.* Cf. [www.rastko.rs/rastko-al/zbornik1990/dmicovic-pesme\\_1.php](http://www.rastko.rs/rastko-al/zbornik1990/dmicovic-pesme_1.php)

Our Gjergj Elez Alia equates with Bosnian Slavic Alija Djerzelez and with Turkish Gürz Ilyas. This figure first appears in Turkish land registries as a landowner in the year 1455. According to Bosnian scholar Rašid Djurić, the Turkish chronicler and historian Ibn Kemal (1468-1534) referred to Gürz Ilyas' heroism in the year 1479-1480 and mentioned his popularity in folk verse in Bosnia. Gjergj Elez Alia is at any rate well known to the Bosnians and Albanians as a legendary hero and symbol of fraternal fidelity.

Many other protagonists of the Albanian songs find their equivalents in the Bosnian material:

Dizdar Osman Aga	(Disdar Osman Aga)
Zuku Bajraktari	(Zuk Barjaktar)
tridhjetë agët	(trideset aga)
Tanusha e Krajlit	(Kraljeva Tanuša)
agët e Jutbinës	(Udbinske age)
Vuku Harambashi	(Vuk Harambaša)
Ajkuna	(Hajkuna)
Bud Aline Tale	(Budinalina Tale)
Llabutani i Krajlit	(Kraljev Labutane)
Krajli i Talirit	(Talirski kralj)
Maxhar Jabanxhija	(Madžar Jabandžija)
Osman Qehaja	(Osman éhaja)
Ymeri i Mujit	(Mujov Imer)
Halil aga i ri	(Mladi Halil aga)
Ganiqe Galani	(Ganiće Galjani)
Plaku Mehmet aga	(Stari Mehmet aga)
Deli Mehmet aga	(Deli Mehmet aga)
Plaku Qefan aga	(Stari Čefan aga)
Rushja e Kralit	(Kraljeva Ruža)
Krajli i Mehorjes	(Krajl iz Merohje)
Arnaut Osmani	(Arnaut Osmani)

Reference is also made in the Albanian songs to the River Danube and to Hungarian guards and costumes, all of which are very remote from areas of traditional Albanian settlement. From these parallels and from other conspicuous Slavic terms in the Albanian songs, it would seem evident that we are dealing with a body of oral material which, perhaps after a long period of evolution, crystallized in a southern Slavic milieu in the borderlands between the Ottoman Empire and the Hapsburg lands of Austria-Hungary, no doubt in the Lika and Krbava valley region, and which was then transmitted by bilingual singers to an Albanian milieu.

By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania were well encompassed and united within the Ottoman Empire and a good proportion of the native population, Albanian and Slav, had converted to Islam. A common culture arose on Ottoman lands in southeastern Europe where ethnic and linguistic divisions were less important than they are today. Muslim territory stretched from the above-mentioned Bihać region southeastwards through Bosnia into the Sandjak of Novi Pazar. Both the Sandjak and neighbouring Kosovo were experiencing a substantial increase in their Albanian-language populations that were in close contact with the Muslim Slavic speakers

of the region. At least by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kosovo had an Albanian majority population, and the Albanians also constituted a sizeable population in the Sandjak, perhaps even a majority. Russian scholar Aleksandr Fedorovich Giferding reported in 1856, for instance, that Albanian was the only language spoken in Sjenica.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that it was in the Sandjak that Albert Lord encountered his bilingual singers. Particularly interesting is the account of Albert Lord, recorded in his book *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge MA 1960), of his conversation with Sali Ugljanin in which that latter expounded on his ability to produce epic songs both in his native Albanian and in Bosnian.

It is clear, as such, that there are many parallels between Albanian and Bosnian epic verse. They have a common origin and, in essence, reflect a common culture.

After transmission, however, the Albanian epic evolved in a solely Albanian milieu and took on many purely Albanian characteristics, values and extra-linguistic forms of expression, and it is this that makes it particularly fascinating. Though the toponyms remained, the background conflict in the narrative shifted from warfare between the Muslims and the Christians to warfare between the Albanians and the *shkjas*, i.e. the Slavs, and from a venue in northern Bosnia and Croatia to a fantasy land of mountains and green valleys.

Albanian scholars, ever ready to assert the antedecence of their culture over that of the Slav and the originality of the Albanian songs, point to old elements of Albanian heroic culture which may have influenced the development of this verse long before the period of crystallization. They stress that epic verse of this type evolved only among the Slavic tribes that lived in close geographical proximity to the indigenous, pre-Slavic population of the Balkans, i.e. the ancestors of the Albanians, and some observers have supposed a pre-Slavic stratum. Unfortunately, however, discussion on the origins of Balkan epic verse has evolved in a typically Balkan way, along the lines of 'I got there first!' After centuries of parallel development and contacts, it is unlikely that we will ever obtain a clear and unequivocal picture of the stratification of the epics.

In view of the place names and personal names involved, of which only a few have been presented above, it would seem obvious that transmission took place from a Bosnian Slavic milieu. Nonetheless, the Songs of the Frontier Warriors are by no means simply translations of Bosnian epic verse. They have undergone continuous and independent evolution since the period of crystallization and are thus neither Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serb, nor pan-Albanian for that matter, but a product of the creative genius of the northern Albanian highlands. Much remains to be done to make this extraordinary cultural heritage known and appreciated as an alternative tradition to the better-known Bosnian songs.

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