

## Why is Albanian Epic Verse So Neglected?

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The epic Balkan Songs of the Frontier Warriors, called *këngë kreshnikësh* in Albanian and *junačke pjesme* in BCS (i.e. Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian - not to forget Montenegrin), are the product of the collective genius of the peoples of the western Balkans, and have emerged in two language variants, in Albanian and in BCS, let us call the latter Bosnian. Despite this, international attention has been focussed almost entirely on the southern Slavic, i.e. Bosnian variant, whereas the Albanian variant has been largely, and quite unjustly neglected. What is the reason for this?

The oral epic verse of the “Frontier Warrior” type is a specifically Balkan phenomenon of which the countries of the region can be proud. It can certainly hold its own with the oral epics that arose in other regions of Europe: the Finnish Kalevala, the eastern Slavic oral epic poetry of the *byliny* type, the Byzantine Greek Acritic songs (Akritiká tragoúdia), the Icelandic eddas, Germanic epic verse such as the Nibelungenlied and Beowulf, the Celtic epics such as the Irish Táin Bó Cúailnge and the Welsh Mabinogion, and the mediaeval French Chanson de Roland. What distinguishes the Balkan epic, in particular, is the fact that, in contrast to all the others, it is still alive –in Albanian.

The Bosnian version of the epics seems to have died out as a living tradition. 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 in the second decade of the twenty-first century, one can still find a good number of *lahutars* who are able to sing and recite the heroic deeds of Muji 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, mostly elderly men constitute the very last traditional native singers of epic verse in Europe!

The Albanian and Bosnian epics have a common origin, and, in essence, reflect a common

culture, being Muslim verse that crystallized in the border region of the Balkans which separated Christendom from the Islamic world. In the 17th and 18th centuries, 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 these Ottoman lands in southeastern Europe where ethnic and linguistic divisions were perhaps less important than they are today. This Muslim territory on the borders of Christendom stretched from the Bihać region in the northwest through Bosnia into the Sanjak of Novi Pazar and Kosovo. Both the Sanjak and neighbouring Kosovo experienced a substantial increase in their Albanian-language populations that were in close contact with the Muslim Slavic speakers of the region.

The earliest variants of the Songs of the Frontier Warriors, as we know them, were no doubt sung in Slavic, but many of the singers of the region, and notably the famous singers discovered and recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s, were Albanians, and they sang in both languages.

It should be noted, in this connection, that although the Albanian epic and the Bosnian epic have many parallels, they are not identical. The Albanian epic was sung not only in the formerly bilingual Sanjak region, but also in solely Albanian-speaking areas, and it thus took on many purely Albanian characteristics, values and extra-linguistic forms of expression. The two language variants have thus taken different directions since their separation.

If the very last traditional native singers of epic verse in Europe are Albanians, why is Albanian epic verse then so neglected on the international scene?

There are numerous answers to this question, but one main reason is that scholarly interest in the Balkan oral epic arose and was first cultivated among Slavicists, that is to say, most of the 'pioneers' of academic research were by profession Slavic scholars. If they mastered a foreign language, it was southern Slavic, the language we traditionally called Serbo-Croatian. Albanian was usually beyond their reach, and the Albanian variants of the epics were thus conveniently ignored.

Let us take a brief look at the early foreign experts on Balkan epic verse who have had an impact on scholarship in this field.

In the German tradition, mention may be made in particular of: Matthias Murko (1861-1952), a Slovene professor at Charles University in Prague, who specialized in southern Slavic oral

epic traditions;<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Gesemann (1888-1948), a philologist and Balkanologist at the German University of Prague from 1922-1944;<sup>2</sup> Josef Matl (1897-1972), an Austrian Slavist and cultural historian at the University of Graz;<sup>3</sup> Alois Schmaus (1901-1970), a Slavist and Balkanologist at the University of Munich from 1951-1970;<sup>4</sup> Maximilian Braun (1903-1984), a philologist and Slavist at the University of Göttingen;<sup>5</sup> and Walther Wünsch (1908-1991), an Austrian musicologist at the Institute for Music Folklore of the Music Academy in Graz.

In the English-language tradition, mention may be made of: the English Baron Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) and the Serbian poet Laza Kostić (1841-1910) who together translated the southern Slavic epic into English;<sup>6</sup> Hector Munro Chadwick (1870-1947), a professor of Anglo-Saxon, and his mediaevalist wife, Nora Kershaw Chadwick (1891-1972) at the University of Cambridge who introduced the Balkan Slavic epic to the English-speaking world;<sup>7</sup> Milman Parry (1902-1935), a noted scholar of epic poetry at Harvard University who did research in Yugoslavia in the years from 1933 to 1935;<sup>8</sup> Clarence Manning (1893-1972), an American Slavist at the Department of Slavic Studies of Columbia University in New York;<sup>9</sup> Albert Lord (1912-1991), a professor of Slavic and comparative literature at Harvard University and a close associate of and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthias Murko, *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Travaux publiés par l'Institut d'études slaves, X. Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929. 75 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Gesemann, *Studien zur südslawischen Volksepik*. Veröffentlichungen der slavistischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft an der deutschen Universität in Prag, 1. Reihe: Untersuchungen, Heft 3. Reichenberg, Gebrüder Stiepel, 1926. 109 pp.

<sup>3</sup> Josef Matl, Die Entwicklungsbedingungen der epischen Volksdichtung bei den Slaven. in: *Jahrbücher für Kultur und Geschichte der Slaven* 5 (1929), p. 57-76.

<sup>4</sup> Schmaus, Alois, Beiträge zur südslawischen Epenforschung. in: *Serta Monacensia. Franz Babinger zum 15. Januar 1951 als Festgruß dargebracht*. Ed.: Hans J. Kissling & Alois Schmaus, Leiden 1952, p. 150-170. reprint in: Alois Schmaus, *Gesammelte slavistische und balkanologische Abhandlungen* 1. Munich: Trofenik, 1971, p. 144-161.

<sup>5</sup> Braun, Maximilian, *Das serbokroatische Heldenlied*. Opera Slavica. Band 1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961. 286 pp.

<sup>6</sup> Lytton, Edward R., *Srbski Pesme or National Songs of Serbia*. By Owen Meredith, First Earl of Lytton, with a preface by G. H. Powell. London: Chatto & Windus, 1917. 159 pp.

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick, Hector Munro, *The Heroic Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912, reprint 1967. 474 pp.; Chadwick, Hector Munro and Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3 vol. 1932, 1936, 1940. xx + 672 pp., xvii + 783 pp., xxvi + 928 pp.

<sup>8</sup> Parry, Milman and Albert Bates Lord (ed.), *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs. Collected by Milman Parry. Edited and translated by Albert Bates Lord. Srpsko-hrvatske junačke pjesme. Sakupio Milman Parry. Uredio i preveo na engleski Albert Bates Lord*. Volume One: Novi Pazar, English translations. Knjiga Prva: Novi Pazar, engleski prevod. Volume Two: Novi Pazar, *Serbocroatian Texts with Introduction and Notes by the Editor and with a Preface by A. Belić. Knjiga Druga: Novi Pazar, srpskohrvatski tekstovi sa uvodom i primedbama urednika i predgovorom A. Belića*. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA / Belgrade: Srpska Akademija Nauka, 1954, 1953. 479 + 448 pp.

<sup>9</sup> Manning, Clarence A. & Muriel Fuller, *Marko the King's Son: Hero of the Serbs*. Illustrated by Alexander Key. New York: McBride, 1932. xiv + 294 pp.

successor to Milman Parry;<sup>10</sup> Anne Pennington (1934-1981), professor of Slavonic Studies at Oxford University;<sup>11</sup> and John Miles Foley (1947-2012), head of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri who also did important fieldwork in Yugoslavia.<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, numerous contemporary scholars in the field, in particular in the United States, but most of them are again Slavicists.

As far as I am aware, of all the above-mentioned scholars, only Alois Schmaus of Munich and Albert Lord of Harvard bothered to learn Albanian, and I am not sure to what extent they actually knew the language well. It is this lack of Albanian language skills among the leading international scholars in the field that led to the shocking imbalance, an imbalance that has continued to the present day. The result is that the Albanian language and, in particular, the Albanian epic have remained *terra incognita* in international research.

The second reason for the neglect of the Albanian epic, related to the first, is the paucity of translations. The great Jewish poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), once said that “Reading poetry in translation is like kissing a bride through her veil.” He was quite right in this. Translation is without any doubt an imperfect art, and translating poetry is perhaps an art destined to failure. There are many puritans who believe that poetry should not be translated at all because the very essence of a poem is the language in which it is written. If you remove the language, there is very little left.

On the other hand, we all have a legitimate interest in finding out what peoples speaking and writing foreign languages have produced in their national literatures. How impoverished the world would be if we did not have translations of Homer and Vergil, and if we knew nothing of the great poems and poets of national literatures around the world. An imperfect art it is, but a necessary one, too.

Scholarly work on oral literature through the medium of translation alone is obviously not ideal, yet important contributions have been made by many scholars who did not master the

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<sup>10</sup> Lord, Albert, *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1960, reprint 1981, 2000. 309 pp.; *The Singer Resumes the Tale: Myth and Poetics*. Edited by Mary Louise Lord. New Haven & London: Cornell University Press, 1995. xiii + 258 pp.

<sup>11</sup> Pennington, Anne and Peter Levi (trans.). *Marko the Prince: Serbo-Croat Historical Songs*. With introduction and notes by Svetozar Koljević. UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. London: Duckworth & New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. 173 pp.

<sup>12</sup> Foley, John Miles, *Oral Formulaic Theory and Research. An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. Garland Folklore Bibliographies, 6. New York & London: Garland, 1985. xiv + 718 pp.; *The Theory of Oral Composition. History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. xv + 170 pp.; *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. xvi + 278 pp.

languages in question. Making the epics available in major languages, whether we agree with the value of translation or not, can be of great influence in making oral literature such as Albanian epic verse, known to the international public. Here again, it must be said that the Albanian epic has remained beyond the pale – largely overlooked and ignored.

Among the few noted scholars who have worked specifically on the Albanian epic and provided translations are the Italian Jesuit priest Fulvio Cordignano (1887-1952) who lived in Albania from 1926 to 1941 and authored the two-volume Italian-language *La poesia epica di confine nell'Albania del Nord* (The Epic Frontier Poetry of Northern Albania) in 1943.<sup>13</sup> It was Cordignano, by the way, who also translated the great literary epic of Gjergj Fishta, *Lahuta e Malcís* (The Highland Lute) into Italian, although the translation was published rather shockingly under someone else's name, a literary forgery par excellence.<sup>14</sup> The Viennese philologist and noted Albanian-expert Maximilian Lambertz (1882-1963) translated the Albanian epic into German, though in a prose form, in *Volkspoesie der Albaner* (Folk Verse of the Albanians) in 1917 after a stay in northern Albania with Austro-Hungarian troops during the First World War.<sup>15</sup> The Russian linguist and *grande dame* of Albanian studies in the Soviet Union, Agnija Vasiljevna Desnickaja (1912-1992) introduced the Albanian epic to the Russian public extensively in her reference work *Albanskaja literatura i albanskij jazyk* (Albanian Literature and the Albanian Language) in 1987.<sup>16</sup>

For the sake of completion, I should mention a number of other translations of the Albanian epic, in addition to the Italian and German ones referred to above. Three volumes of the oral epic were commissioned in Tirana during the dictatorship and were published in French: *Chansonnier des preux albanais* (Songs of the Albanian Warriors) in 1967,<sup>17</sup> and *Trésor du chansonnier populaire albanais* (Treasure of Albanian Folk Songs) in 1975,<sup>18</sup> both edited by Zihni Sako (1912-

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<sup>13</sup> Fulvio Cordignano, *La poesia epica di confine nell'Albania del Nord*. Collana Studi sui paesi dell'Illyricum, N. 6. 2 vol. Venice and Padua: Tip. del Seminario di Padova, 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Gjergj Fishta. *Il liuto della montagna (Lahuta e Malcís)*. Prefazione, commento, traduzione e note di Papàs Ignazio Parrino. Centro Internazionale di Studi Albanesi presso l'Università di Palermo. 4 fasc. Palermo: Scuola grafica salesiana, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1973. xx + 83, lviii + 157, xxxii + 299, xl + 95 pp.

<sup>15</sup> Maximilian Lambertz, *Volkspoesie der Albaner: eine einführende Studie*. Zur Kunde der Balkanhalbinsel, II. Quellen und Forschungen, 6. Sarajevo: J. Studnička & Co., Sarajevo 1917. 184 pp.

<sup>16</sup> Agnija V. Desnickaja, *Albanskaja literatura i albanskij jazyk*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1987. 293 pp.

<sup>17</sup> Sako, Zihni, *Chansonnier des preux albanais*. Introduction de Zihni Sako. Collection UNESCO d'Oeuvres Représentatives. Série Européenne. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1967. 143 pp.

<sup>18</sup> Sako, Zihni, Qemal Haxhihasani and Kolë Luka (ed.), *Trésor du chansonnier populaire albanais*. Tirana: Académie des Sciences, 1975. 332 pp.

1981); and *Chansonnier épique albanais* (Albanian Epic Folk Songs) in 1983,<sup>19</sup> published by Qemal Haxhihasani (1916-1991) and translated by Kolë Luka (1917-1994). Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) translated nine epic songs into Italian for his volume *Poesia popolare Albanese* (Albanian Folk Verse) in 1957.<sup>20</sup> A nice collection of epic material was also published in Russian by David Samojlov (1920-1990) in *Starinnye albanskije skazanija* (Old Albanian Legends) in 1971, translated by various authors.<sup>21</sup>

In English, I am rather perturbed to see that the only substantial collection of Albanian epic verse is still my own: *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Albanian Epic Verse in a Bilingual English-Albanian Edition* published in 2004.<sup>22</sup> This material is now also to be found in its entirety on my website: [http://www.albanianliterature.net/oral\\_lit2/OL2-01.html](http://www.albanianliterature.net/oral_lit2/OL2-01.html)

Mention must also be made of modest bits of translation into English in the studies by Stavro Skendi (1905-1989) in *Albanian and South Slavic Oral Epic Poetry* in 1954;<sup>23</sup> by Arshi Pipa (1920-1997) in *Albanian Folk Verse, Structure and Genre* in 1978;<sup>24</sup> and by John Kolsti in *The Bilingual Singer: A Study of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic Traditions* in 1990.<sup>25</sup> Two fragments were also published recently by Gjekë Marinaj (b. 1965) and Frederick Turner (b. 1943) in their anthology *Sung across the Shoulder: Heroic Poetry of Illyria* in 2011.<sup>26</sup> To what extent the important Albert Lord Collection at Harvard has been translated I do not know.

It is, at any rate, apparent that much remains to be done to make the Albanian epic material more accessible to the international public, in particular to international scholars who do not know

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<sup>19</sup> Haxhihasani, Qemal, Kolë Luka, Alfred Uçi and Misto Treska (ed.), *Chansonnier épique albanais*. Version française Kolë Luka. Avant-propos Ismail Kadare. Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave, 1983. 456 pp.

<sup>20</sup> Koliqi, Ernesto (ed.), *Poesia popolare albanese* a cura di Ernesto Koliqi. *Vjerrsha popullore shqipe*. Edizioni Fussi. Florence: Casa Editrice Sansoni, 1957, reprint 1986? 111 pp.

<sup>21</sup> Samojlov, David (ed.), *Starinnye albanskije skazanija*. *Perevod s albanskogo*. Moscow: Izdat. Khudožestvennaja Literatura, 1971. 223 pp.

<sup>22</sup> Elsie, Robert and Janice Mathie-Heck, *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Këngë Kreshnikësh. Albanian epic verse in a bilingual English-Albanian edition*. Edited introduced and translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2004. xviii + 414 pp.

<sup>23</sup> Skendi, Stavro, *Albanian and south Slavic Oral Epic Poetry*. *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, Volume 44 (1954). Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1954, reprint New York: Kraus, 1969. 221 pp.

<sup>24</sup> Pipa, Arshi, *Albanian Folk Verse: Structure and Genre*. *Albanische Forschungen*, 17. *Trilogia Albanica* 1. Munich: Dr. Dr. Rudolf Trofenik, 1978. 191 pp.

<sup>25</sup> Kolsti, John, *The Bilingual Singer: A Study of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic Traditions*. *Harvard dissertations in folklore and oral traditions*. New York: Garland, 1990. 379 pp.

<sup>26</sup> Marinaj, Gjekë and Frederick Turner (ed.), *Sung across the Shoulder: Heroic Poetry of Illyria*. Translated, edited and introduced by Gjekë Marinaj and Frederick Turner. Richardson TX: Mundus Artium Press, 2011. 226 pp.

Albanian. I believe that, despite the veil and the longing bride referred to above by Hayim Bialik, it is absolutely essential to get more of this great heritage of the Albanian people – a heritage cultivated by Albanians living in no less than five Balkan countries – into English and other major languages.

Equally important is making available the great mass of oral epic material that has already been recorded, collected and compiled by Albanian-language scholars in Prishtina, Tirana and elsewhere, but which – for lack of funds or for other reasons – has not been published. This is one of the many scandalous examples of how the Albanians themselves have neglect their national heritage.

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