

Albanian Oral History – its Importance and my Experience

After Alessandro Portelli, I am rather reluctant to speak on the subject of oral history as I know too little about the practicalities of it. However, I would like to provide you with a few thoughts from my own experience in a number of closely related fields.

The Importance of Oral Tradition among the Albanians

Firstly, let me say something on the importance of orality in the Albanian-speaking world. In my view, oral tradition and oral history are much more important among the Albanians than they are elsewhere in Europe. There are good reasons for this:

1. Albanian history has been largely written by foreigners, not by Albanians, although the latter should normally know more about what happened in the past. This has been a result of acute under-development in Albania and Kosovo and, in particular, of long-standing illiteracy. At the time of the communist takeover in Albania and in Kosovo in 1944, illiteracy cast its shadow over about 80 percent of the male population, and virtually all the women, the prime bearers of oral culture, were illiterate beasts of burden. In Kosovo, the level of female education is still among the lowest in Europe, although things are now changing rapidly.

2. The destruction of cultural assets (libraries, monasteries, books and manuscripts) over the centuries has been enormous among the Albanians. There is probably not a single Albanian town or village that has not been burned to the ground in war or fighting, or been destroyed in some other way at one time or another. The past of the Albanians is tragic and yet it is a tragedy that is wrapped in dense fog. As a result, much of what is now written about the country and its history is pure speculation. What do we actually know about such important topics as the early history of the Albanians, and about their origins and development as a people? What do we even know about the realities of the Second World War in Albania and Kosovo, or about the communist dictatorships that took over thereafter? Very little. The communist regime that held sway in Albania for almost half a century had its very own distorted narrative of Albanian history and certainly a distorted view of its own role in history, and ensured that this narrative was taught in all schools for two to three generations.

3. The communists did much to eradicate backwardness and illiteracy in Albania, but at the same time, they stamped out much tradition, in particular with the radical destruction of the religious communities in the late 1960s and with the suppression of traditional beliefs, superstitions and old customs. Even things as simple as the transmission of oral information on cooking, i.e. on Albanian cuisine, was interrupted by a chronic lack of foodstuffs in the 1980s. What was the point of mothers teaching their daughters how to cook if there were no ingredients to be had?

4. Albanian oral history has suffered elsewhere, too, in particular in regions where the native Albanian narrative has been overlaid by another narrative of history. I am speaking here of the

Kosovo Albanians and of the Chams, whose history was written and was widely deformed by neighbouring peoples for their own purposes. Up to a few years ago, anyone interested in the history of Kosovo or Chameria had to refer to books written by Serbian and Greek scholars and, it must be said, in many cases, by Serbian and Greek propagandists.

My Experience with Oral Traditions

1. In view of the destruction of Albanian culture and of the sources of Albanian history, it became very important for me to gather and publish what could still be found in folk tradition. The results of my initial endeavours were compiled in the book: *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture* (New York 2001). The Albanian translation was published as: *Leksiku i kulturës popullore shqiptare: besime, mitologji, fe, doke, rite, festa dhe veçori kulturore* (Tirana 2005). The German version is called: *Handbuch zur albanischen Volkskunde* (Wiesbaden 2002, reprint London 2015). It became evident to me that much traditional information on Albanian folk culture, for instance on customs, superstitions and mythology, had been lost in Albania after half a century of communist dictatorship, but it was preserved, fortunately, in the more traditional cultures of the Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia.

2. My perhaps most immediate contact with recording oral tradition has been my interest in the Albanian language, i.e. in Albanian dialects. Many of you may have seen my website www.AlbanianLanguage.net on which I have presented about 200 dialect recordings. This website has been offline for a while and is presently being relaunched in a more modern format so that the recordings can be heard not only on computers, but also on tablets and cell phones. Each dialect recording contains basic information on the dialect, the speaker and the subject matter. The project began during the Kosovo war, when we conducted recordings with refugees at a refugee camp here around the swimming pool in Tirana. I did most of the recordings, made from 1999 to the present, myself with the help of my Albanian driver, Artur Metani, who was very skilled at overcoming any hesitation on the part of the speakers. We typically stopped shepherds at the roadside and recorded their speech. My interest here was primarily linguistic, but I think there is a wide range of material in the audio recordings, enough to keep experts on oral tradition happy. In some cases, we provoked the speakers with a question, but in others it was quite sufficient just to stand beside them and let them say whatever was on their mind. There are now over 200 recordings in the collection, usually from two to 15 minutes long. They include all the countries where Albanian is traditionally spoken: Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy, etc. I have been informed that the portion with 75 dialect recordings from Albania itself is now online again.

<http://dialects.albanianlanguage.net/AL/>

3. My more recent interest in oral tradition has been in Albanian oral literature - folk tales, legends and oral epic verse. I have not done any folktale recordings here directly myself, but have translated and published much earlier and contemporary material. Among my recent publications in this field are: *Albanian Folktales and Legends* (London 2015) and *The Hasluck Collection of Albanian Folktales* (London 2015). I am currently preparing an anthology of Albanian folktales in German, based on the work of noted scholars such as Johann Georg von Hahn, Gustav Meyer, Jan Urban Jarnik, August Leskien, Holger Pedersen and Maximilian Lambertz.

What is Important

Much has been done in the field of oral history and oral literature, and yet I feel that we are still at the very beginning. This is why this seminar organised by Anna Di Lellio is so important.

There are broad fields of Albanian history that can be at least complemented by oral history. To be very practical and specific, I would recommend the following:

1. A recorded oral history of the communist dictatorship in Albania. Many people directly involved are now very old, so we must not waste time. Recordings should be made of the victims of the dictatorship, who will be happy to speak out and tell their tale, but also of the one-time rulers, Party members and communist officials who were close to those in power. Such recordings are probably more difficult to obtain because many of those implicated will be reluctant to speak out. Yet twenty-five years have passed since the dictatorship and perhaps some will now want to record their place in that murky chapter of history.

2. The oral history of Albanians from regions outside of Albania whose narrative, as I suggested above, has been superimposed by others. Here I am speaking of the tragic history of the Cham Albanians from 1945 on, and of course, of the Kosovo Albanians during the 1998-1999 war, not to mention the Albanians in Macedonia and elsewhere whose place in history has been somewhat suppressed or at least ignored. Not to be forgotten is the collective memory of the last generation of the speakers of Arvanitic Albanian in central Greece, all now above the age of 80. It will soon be gone forever.

3. There are many other fields where oral tradition can preserve what will soon be lost, but I will leave this to the experts here among us today.

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