

Arapi, Fatos: Ancient Albanian songs. Studies. Translated by William Bland. Tirana. Enciklopedike 1996. 327 pp.

The dramatic changes which Albania has gone through over the last five years have brought scholarship in the field of ethnography and oral literature there to the verge of extinction. Aside from two early French-language translations of Albanian oral verse: *Trésor du chansonnier populaire albanais* (Tirana 1975) and *Chansonnier épique albanais* (Tirana 1983), John Kolsti's masterful *The bilingual singer. A study of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian oral epic traditions* (New York 1990) and the present reviewer's collection *Albanian folktales and legends* (Tirana 1994), little has been published on Albanian heroic verse and oral literature in the last quarter of a century in major languages.

Scholars in this field will thus be pleased to note the recent publication in English of this comparative study on some of the main legendary and historical cycles of Albanian oral poetry. Author Fatos Arapi (b. 1930), who made a reputation for himself in the sixties and seventies as one of his country's leading poets, has been fascinated by folk verse for years now. It was in 1988 that he first published his *Këngë të moçme shqiptare - Studime*, the Albanian-language original of the present English-language edition.

Following the introduction by Swedish authors Sven-Bertil Jansson and Ullmar Qvick (p. 5-10), *Ancient Albanian Songs* divides into three broad sections, covering three major cycles of Albanian oral verse: 1) *Notes on 'The Song of the Dead Brother and Sister' in Albanian folk tradition* (p. 11-136), 2) *The Cycle of the Heroes - its essence and distribution* (p. 137-235), and 3) *The Albanian folk song on the Battle of Kosovo of 1389* (p. 236-270). Rounding up the volume are sample texts, i.e. variants in English translation of the 'Song of the Dead Brother' and of the 'Song of the Battle of Kosovo of 1389' (p. 271-325).

The first section of *Ancient Albanian Songs* surveys the presence in Albanian and Balkan oral literature of the so-called Lenora motif, so named after the work of German romantic poet Gottfried August Bürger (1747-1794). This motif is found in various forms in Albanian in the epic song of Halil Garria, in the ballad of Dhoqina and in the well-known song of Constantine and Garentina, all of which are analysed and textually contrasted with corresponding ballads in Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Greek, Romanian and Aromanian. The second section focusses on the *Këngë Kreshnikesh* (Songs of the Frontier Warriors), similar in theme and content to the Serbo-Croatian and especially Bosnian *junačke pjesme*. Discussed are the ballad of Gjergj Elez Alia and the extensive heroic cycle of Mujo and Halili. The third section centres on Albanian oral literature about the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389.

Arapi's study presents much material which will be new to the non-Albanian speaking reader and, as such, provides a useful contribution to our knowledge of oral literature in the Balkans. The comparative approach is refreshing. This is the book's strength. *Ancient Albanian Songs* must be read with a critical eye, however. At times, the Balkan mentality and a decidedly Albanian perspective tend to overlay scholarly objectivity. In a book published in 1996, one is surprised to note the unabatingly strong presence of the two ideologies (communism and nationalism) which did so much to render sterile the young and fragile buds of Albanian scholarship in the past. The Stalinist heritage still seeps through in statements like: "Later studies of our socialist science have extended and deepened the correct conception of the national character of our legendary epic." (p. 139). On the one hand, this oddity is understandable since the book is basically a translation of the 1988 Albanian-language edition. Nonetheless a quick revision of the translation might have spared the foreign reader such excesses. Also to be noted throughout the book are numerous printing mistakes and irksome translation difficulties.

Decidedly misleading, for instance, is the title *Ancient Albanian Songs*. The term

'early' would have been preferable, and even 'old' would have been acceptable in dealing with these verse cycles. The term 'ancient', for its part, only serves to aggravate the on-going discussion about the period during which the Albanian ballads crystallized. If they are indeed basically a creation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as is generally assumed outside the Balkans, the word 'ancient' can only be interpreted as wishful thinking. But perhaps we are simply confronted here with one of the many translation errors.

Despite the above remarks of criticism, *Ancient Albanian songs* is certainly worthwhile reading for the general public, bringing as it does, the fascinating though often forgotten and ignored world of Albanian oral literature to the attention of readers and scholars beyond the Balkans.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim / Eifel