

ALBANIAN LITERATURE IN THE MOSLEM TRADITION
Eighteenth and early nineteenth century Albanian writing in Arabic script

by
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1. *Historical and cultural setting*

On 28 June 1389, the Turks defeated a coalition of Balkan forces under Serbian leadership at Kosovo Polje, the Plain of the Blackbirds, and established themselves as masters of the Balkans. By 1393 they had overrun Shkodër, although the Venetians were soon able to recover the city and its imposing citadel. The conquest of Albania continued into the early years of the fifteenth century. The mountain fortress of Krujë was taken in 1415 and the equally strategic towns of Vlorë, Berat and Kaninë in southern Albania fell in 1417. By 1431, the Turks had incorporated southern Albania into the Ottoman Empire and set up a sanjak administration with its capital in Gjirokastër, captured in 1419. Feudal northern Albania remained in the control of its autonomous tribal leaders, though now under the suzerain power of the Sultan.

The Turkish conquest did not meet without resistance on the part of the Albanians, notably under George Castrioti, known as Scanderbeg (1405-1468), prince and now national hero. Sent by his father as a hostage to Sultan Murad II (r. 1421-1451), the young Castrioti was converted to Islam and given a Moslem education in Edirne (Adrianople). The Turks called him Iskender and gave him the rank of bey, hence the name Scanderbeg. In 1443, Scanderbeg took advantage of the Turkish defeat at Nish at the hands of Hungarian commander John Hunyadi (ca. 1385-1456) to abandon the Ottoman army, return to Albania and re-embrace Christianity. His first great achievement was to unite the feudal and independent-minded tribes of northern Albania into the League of Lezhë in 1444. By a ruse, he took over the fortress of Krujë and was proclaimed commander-in-chief of an Albanian army which, though independent, could be no match for the huge military potential of the Turks. In 1453, Constantinople itself fell to the forces of Sultan Mehmet II Fâtih (the Conqueror), thus putting an end to the thousand-year-old Byzantine Roman Empire of the East. But Albania, though abandoned to its fate, was not to give up easily.

In the following years, Scanderbeg successfully repulsed thirteen Ottoman incursions, including three major Ottoman sieges of the citadel of Krujë led by the Sultans themselves (Murad II in 1450 and Mehmet II Fâtih in 1466 and 1467). He was widely admired in the Christian world for his resistance to the Turks and given the title 'Atleta Christi' by Pope Calixtus III. Albanian resistance held out until after Scanderbeg's death on 17 January 1468 at Lezhë (Alessio). In 1478 the fortress at Krujë was finally taken by Turkish troops, Shkodër fell in 1479 and Durrës at last in 1501. By the end of the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire had reached its political zenith and Albania was to be subjected, in all, to over four centuries of Turkish colonization which changed the face of the country radically.

Modern Albanian scholars tend to view the consequences of these centuries of Turkish rule as completely negative, with wild Asiatic hordes ravaging and plundering a country which might otherwise have flourished in the cradle of European civilization. This rather one-sided view is determined to a large extent by the experience of the Albanian nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire was in a period of profound decay. Although the Turkish occupation of Albania brought untold suffering to the inhabitants of the country, it also introduced a new and refined culture which was later to become an integral part

of the Albanian identity.

A new religion, Islam, had wedged itself between the Catholic north and the Orthodox south of Albania and, with time, became the dominant faith of the country. Although during the first decades of Turkish rule there were few Moslems among the Albanians themselves, an estimated 50% of the population of northern Albania had been converted to Islam by the early seventeenth century. Roman Catholicism and Greek and Serbian Orthodoxy in Albania had, after all, been the vehicles of foreign cultures, propelled by foreign languages, religions to which the Albanians, as opposed to their Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek neighbours, had only been superficially converted. The mass conversion of the Albanian population to Islam is all the more understandable in view of the heavy poll taxes (*harâç*) imposed on the Christian inhabitants of the Empire (*râyâ*).

Hasan Kaleshi (1922-1976)¹ has convincingly suggested that the Turkish occupation of the Balkans had at least the one positive consequence of saving the Albanians from ethnic assimilation by the Slavs, just as the Slavic invasion of the Balkans in the sixth century had put an end to the process of Romanization which had threatened to assimilate the non-Latin-speaking ancestors of the Albanians a thousand years earlier. Although not recognized by the Turks as an ethnic minority (the population of the Ottoman Empire was divided according to religion, not according to nationality), the Albanians managed to survive as a people and indeed substantially expand their areas of settlement under Turkish rule. Shkodër and the other urban centres along the Albanian coast became truly Albanian cities with an Albanian population for the first time.

While the Turkish Empire, with its central organization and power base focussed on Istanbul, left Albania the cultural and political backwater it had been from the start, Ottoman Turkish culture, which was to reach its zenith during the Tulip Age of the eighteenth century, penetrated the country thoroughly. Southern and central Albanian cities like Berat and Elbasan with their newly constructed fortifications, mosques and medresas became provincial centres of oriental learning and indeed experienced something of a cultural renaissance under Islam, as did Shkodër (Scutari) and Gjakovë (Djakovica) in the north. Wandering poets, artists and scholars began to enjoy the patronage of local governors and pashas as they did throughout Asia Minor.

Just as the first authors of Christian Albania had written in Latin or Greek, the first writers from Moslem Albania used the literary vehicles of the Ottoman Empire: Turkish and Persian, many of them with notable success.

2. *Turkish-language writers of Albanian origin*

One of the most original among the early Ottoman poets was Messiah (Mesîhî) of Prishtinë² (ca. 1470-1512), known in Turkish as Priştineli Mesîhî. We assume him to have been an Albanian from Prishtinë, though he must have lived in Istanbul from an early age on. Messiah was not only an exceptionally gifted poet but also a talented calligrapher and held a position as secretary to Hadim Alî Paşa during the reign of Bayazid II (r. 1481-1512). A pleasure-loving *şehir oglani* (city boy), as the biographer Âşik Çelebî called him, Messiah could more readily be found in the taverns and pleasure gardens with his friends and lovers than at work. Though his

¹ cf. Kaleshi 1975.

² cf. Gibb 1902, vol. 2, p. 226-256, Bombaci 1969, p. 330-333, Morina 1987, and Kaleshi 1991, p. 22-24.

hedonistic lifestyle may have impeded a career advancement, it produced what is generally regarded as some of the best Ottoman verse of the period. Much quoted is his *Murabba’-i bahâr*³ (Ode to Spring) which, after publication with a Latin translation in 1774 by Orientalist Sir William Jones (1746-1794), was to become the best known Turkish poem in Europe for a long time. It begins as follows:

”Dinle bülbül kissasin kim geldi eyyâm-i bahâr
Kurdi her bir bâgda hengâme hengâm-i bahâr
Oldi sîm ef.,sân ana ezhâr-i bâdâm-i bahâr
‘Ayş û nûş et kim geçer kalmaz bu eyyâm-i bahâr”

Listen to the nightingale, the days of spring have come,
All gardens have been brought to life by the spring season.
The almond blossoms scatter their silvery light,
Drink and enjoy for the days of spring will soon pass.

More original than the ‘Ode to Spring’ is Messiah’s *Şehr-engîz* (The terror of the town), which was soon to become a prototype for a new literary genre in Ottoman verse. In 186 witty couplets he pays tribute to the charms and beauty of forty-six young men of Edirne (Adrianople). It is a masterpiece of early 16th century Turkish verse which, with its puns and ironic humour, is somewhat of a relief amidst the otherwise ubiquitous outpourings of high-brow mystical verse. Messiah confesses light-heartedly that the poem itself is a sin but he is confident that God will pardon him: ”My wandering heart has broken into so many pieces, each of which is attached to one of those beauties.”

Another sixteenth century writer of Albanian origin was Jahja bej Dukagjini⁴ (d. 1575), known in Turkish as *Dukagin-zâde Yahyâ bey* or *Taşlıcalı Yahyâ*. A scion of the Dukagjini tribe inhabiting the barren Albanian alps north of the river Drin, he himself stemmed from the Pljevlja region, now in northern Montenegro, and was sent as a youth to serve among the janissaries. Unlike many Albanian youths educated in the service of the Ottoman Empire, Jahja bej was not oblivious of his Albanian origin. In one of his poems he tells us: ”The Albanian race is my race, all my house live by the sword. What though that lion-o’erthrowing band falcon-like make their home among the rocks! This is the virtue in him who is of Albanian race. He is like the jewel, found among the rocks⁵.

Jahja bej was both a brave soldier and a courageous writer. He had no fear of defying public opinion or of displeasing court officials with his sometimes polemic verse. Once accused by the Grand Vizier of having dared to write an elegy on the death of Prince Mustafa, who was executed in Konya by his own father Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1533, Jahja bej cleverly replied, ”We condemn him with the Padishah, but we mourn him with the people.” Having made too many enemies though, he deemed it best to retire to his estate near Zvornik in Bosnia where, as an old man in his eighties, busy working on the completion of his *divan*, he died in 1575 [983 A.H.]. Of his five *mesnevî*, the most popular is *Şâh u gedâ* (The king and the beggar),

³ cf. Rossi 1954.

⁴ cf. Gibb 1904, vol. 3, p. 116-132, Bombaci 1969, p. 345-346, and Kaleshi 1991, p. 19-22.

⁵ cf Gibb 1904, vol. 3,p. 117.

which he tells us he finished in just one week. This much appreciated metrical romance idealizes the pure love for an Istanbul youth of unequalled beauty (stylized as the king because he reigns over the heart) by a pious lover (stylized as the beggar because of his suppliant longing). He was also the author of the above-mentioned *divan* of ghazals which are generally considered less original. Another Turkish poet of repute was Jahja bej's brother Ahmed bej Dukagjini, known in Turkish as Dukagin-zâde Ahmed bey.

At least three early Turkish prose writers of note seem to have been of Albanian origin. They are the early sixteenth century Ayâs, who compiled a chronicle which remained unpublished; Grand Vizier Lütfi Pasha (d. 1564), author of a treatise on the duties of state; and Koçi bey from Korçë, counsellor to Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623-1640), whose political treatise on the ills of the Empire and how to cure them caused the great Austrian Orientalist Baron von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) to title him the 'Ottoman Montesquieu'.

Throughout the five centuries of its forced union with the Ottoman Empire, Albania was to produce many other great men whose impact on Turkish culture was by no means marginal. Among them were theologian and scholar Hoca Hasan Tahsîn (1812-1881), the first rector of the University of Istanbul; lexicographer and encyclopaedist Sami Frashëri (1850-1904), known in Turkish as Şemseddîn Sâmî; panislamic poet Mehmet Âkif (1873-1936), author of the Turkish national anthem of 1921; and Riza Tevfik, one of the greatest Turkish philosophers of the period. Fortunately though, in the eighteenth century, the creative energy of the Ottoman Albanians also began to flow into their own unpolished language and evolving culture.

3. *The literature of the Bejtexhinj*

The transition from Turkish, Persian and Arabic to Albanian as a means of literary expression resulted in an example of what is known as *Aljamiado* literature, a Spanish term denoting a vernacular literature written in Arabic script and strongly influenced by Islamic culture. *Aljamiado* literatures arose notably in Spain and Portugal during the Moorish period and in Bosnia and Albania under Turkish rule. The first attempts in the early eighteenth century by Albanian writers raised in an Islamic culture to express themselves not in the languages of the Orient, but in their own native tongue, were just as decisive and momentous as the transition from Latin to Albanian had been for the creation of early (16th and 17th century) Albanian literature.

The literature of the *Bejtexhinj*⁶ as this period of Albanian writing is called, consists almost exclusively of verse composed in Arabic script. The Arabic writing system had already been adapted, albeit rather awkwardly, to the needs of Ottoman Turkish and was now being moulded to fit the more elaborate phonetic system of Albanian, or more precisely, of the Albanian dialects in question. It proved to be just as unsatisfactory for Albanian as it had been for Turkish. But not only the script was oriental. The language of the *Bejtexhinj* was an Albanian so loaded with Turkish, Arabic and Persian vocabulary that it is quite tedious for Albanians today to read without a lexicon. Indeed it is likely that the reader of classical Turkish not

⁶ Alb. *bejtexhi*, pl. *bejtexhinj*: term for a popular poet in the Moslem tradition, literally 'couplet maker', from the Turkish *beyit* 'couplet'. Alternative terms for these wandering minstrels were *ashik*, literally 'lover', and Turkish *saz şairleri* 'musical poets'. For general sources of this literature, cf. Kaleshi 1956, 1958, 1966-67, 1975, 1991, Myderrizi 1955c, 1959, 1965, Shuteriqi 1976, Salihu 1987, and Pirraku 1988.

knowing Albanian would understand more of many texts than the reader of Albanian not knowing any oriental languages. The stratum of foreign vocabulary that penetrated the Albanian language in this period was used firstly to express the attributes of a new religion and new culture which were initially quite foreign to the Albanians. Secondly and equally important in verse production at least, the use of traditional Arabic and Persian vocabulary greatly facilitated composition in the classical metres and rhymes to be adhered to, as it had in Ottoman Turkish poetry.

The poetry of the *Bejtexhinj* was strongly influenced by Turkish, Persian and Arabic literary models in fashion at the time both in Istanbul and the Middle East. Most of the genres and forms prevalent in Turkish and Persian verse are to be encountered in Albanian. Here we find, either as isolated poems or within the *divans*: the *murabba'*, quatrain; the *ilâhî*, religious hymns; the *kasîda*, the longer panegyric odes favoured by the Arabs; and the *ghazal*, shorter poems, often love lyrics which were favoured by the Turks and Persians. The metrical system was basically syllabic although occasional attempts were made to introduce quantitative metres⁷. The subject matter was often religious, either meditatively intimate or openly didactic, serving to spread the faith. The speculative character of much of this verse derived its inspiration from the currents of Islam: from authoritative Sunnite spirituality to the intense mystical spheres of Shi'ite Sufism and later, to the more liberal, though equally mystical reflections of Bektashi pantheism. Some secular verse does occur too: love lyrics, nature poetry and historical and philosophical verse in which we encounter the occasional ironic pondering on the vacillations of existence from a world which is often quite exotic to the Western reader and to the modern Albanians themselves.

The literature of the *Bejtexhinj* was recorded in manuscripts, most of which are now lost or, at best, still impossible to trace. A few late copies of manuscripts (not the originals, alas) are preserved in the Central State Archives in Tiranë, but most of the surviving manuscript material is still in the hands of private owners, in particular in former Yugoslavia. Of the manuscripts which have been preserved, very few have been published. As such, the writing of the *Bejtexhinj* constitutes one of the least known chapters of Albanian literature.

The oldest Albanian poem in Arabic script is a light-hearted prayer in praise of coffee, dated 1725 [1137 A.H.], and was written by one Muçi Zade, son of Muçi, whom we learn was an old man at the time of composition. Its refrain, "Lord, do not leave me without coffee," will no doubt have a familiar ring to many coffee addicts. Discovered in a manuscript from Korçë which is now preserved in Tiranë, this poem consists of seventeen quatrains with an AAAB rhyme. It is the oldest piece of literature in the southern Tosk dialect we know to have been written in Albania itself.

The first major poet among the *Bejtexhinj* was Nezim Frakulla⁸ (ca. 1680-1760), alternatively known as Nezim Berati or Ibrahim Nezimi. He was born in the village of Frakull near Fier and lived a good deal of his life in Berat, a flourishing centre of Moslem culture at the time. Frakulla studied in Istanbul where he wrote his first poetry in Turkish, Persian and perhaps Arabic, including two *divans*. About 1731, he returned to Berat where he is known to have been involved in literary rivalry with other poets of the period, notably with Mulla Ali, muftî of Berat. Between 1731 and 1735 he composed a *divan* and various other poetry in Albanian, including an Albanian-Turkish dictionary in verse form. Although we do not possess the whole of the original

⁷ cf. Rossi 1946, p. 243.

⁸ cf. Rossi 1946 and Myderrizi 1954.

divan, we do have copies of ca. 110 poems from it. Some of his verse was put to music and survived the centuries orally. Nezim Frakulla tells us himself that he was the first person to compose a divan in Albanian:

*”Divan kush pat folturë shqip?
Ajan e bëri Nezimi,
Bejan kush pat folturë shqip?
Insan e bëri Nezimi.*

*Ky lisan qe bërë harab
Në gussa me shumë hixhab
Shahid mjaft është ky kitab
Handan e bëri Nezimi.”*

Who made a divan speak in Albanian?
It was Nezim who made it known.
Who made elegance speak in Albanian?
It was Nezim who made it noble.

This language was in ruins,
Veiled in suffering and much shame.
Proof enough is this book
That Nezim made it rejoice.

Nezim Frakulla’s verse was known to the German-language Albanologist Johann Georg von Hahn (1811-1869), who published eight of Frakulla’s poems⁹ in 1854. His name also appeared in the first substantial anthology of Albanian literature¹⁰ of 1941, edited by Namik Ressuli (1912-1985) et al., who was in possession of a 62-folio manuscript of the *divan*.

Frakulla’s divan includes verse ranging from panegyrics on local pashas and military campaigns, to odes on friends and patrons, poems on separation from and longing for his friends and (male) lovers, descriptions of nature in the springtime, religious verse and, in particular, love lyrics. The imagery of the latter ghazal, some of which are devoted to his nephew, is that of Arabic, Persian and Turkish poetry with many of the classical themes, metaphors and allusions: love as an illness causing the poet to waste away, the cruel lover whose glance could inflict mortal wounds, or the cupbearer whose beauty could reduce his master to submission.

Nezim Frakulla enjoyed the patronage and protection of Sulejman Pasha of Elbasan and of Ismail Pasha Velabishti, the latter a poet himself. At some point after 1747, after having returned to Istanbul in search of work, he was sent to Khotin in Bessarabia (now in the Ukraine), probably into exile. There he composed several *kasîda*, one of them celebrating the ferman authorizing his return home and another on his journey back to Berat via Skopje and Elbasan. Of his arrival in the latter city, where his verse seems to have been particularly popular for many years afterwards, Frakulla proclaimed:

⁹ cf. Hahn 1854, vol. 2, p. 142-146.

¹⁰ *Shkrimtarët shqiptarë*, vol. 1, Tiranë 1941, p. 107-109.

*Në Elbasan hym me gzim
Posi sheqer o Nezim.*

Elbasan we entered with delight,
As sweet as sugar, oh Nezim!

Whether due to political intrigue or to the often caustic literary polemics he engaged in, Frakulla fell into disfavour and left Berat once again to settle in Elbasan for a number of years. On his subsequent return to Berat he seems to have been imprisoned. At any rate, he died in old age as a prisoner in Istanbul in 1760 [1173 A.H.].

Frakulla not only considered himself the first poet to write in Albanian, but also lauded himself as the Sa'dî and Hâfîz of his times. His *kasîda* in Albanian, he tells us, are comparable to those of 'Urfî in Persian and Nef'î in Turkish. Most experts would consider this comparison somewhat exaggerated. While Nezim Frakulla doubtlessly had initiative and talent, his Albanian verse did not by any means reach the level of literary perfection of the Persian classics, nor was the clumsy mixture of Albanian, Turkish and Persian he employed refined enough to enable him to do so. What he did accomplish was to lay the foundations for a new literary tradition in Albania, one which was to last for two centuries.

A gifted contemporary of Nezim Frakulla is Sulejman Naibi¹¹, also known as Sulejman Ramazani. He was born in Berat where he lived most of his life and died in 1771 [1185 A.H.]. Little else is known of his existence except that he married in Elbasan and is thought to have spent some time in the Middle East. Naibi is the author of a *divan* in Albanian, a manuscript of which survived until 1944 in Fier. This is perhaps the same manuscript said to have existed in Berat in 1913. Unfortunately, no copy of the manuscript was made before its disappearance during the Second World War, and as a result, we know Sulejman Naibi's verse only from the few poems which have surfaced in other manuscripts or which have survived orally in central Albanian folk songs, such as *Mahmudeja e stolisurë* (Mahmude the adorned). Among the little of this eight and twelve syllable verse which has been published, we find delicate lyrics of refined metrical precision, describing the joys of love and the beauties of women. His Albanian is less imbued with orientalisms than that of Nezim Frakulla. Indeed, in one of his poems, Naibi accuses Frakulla of using too much Turkish vocabulary.

Hasan Zyko Kamberi¹² was born in the second half of the eighteenth century in Starje e Kolonjë, a southern Albanian village at the foot of Mount Grammos. Of his life we know only that he took part in the Turkish-Austrian Battle of Smederevo on the Danube east of Belgrade in 1789 [1203 A.H.] in an army under the command of Ali Pasha Tepelena (1741-1822). He died as a dervish, no doubt of the Bektashi sect, in his native village at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His tomb in Starje e Kolonjë was turned into a shrine known locally as the *turbeh* of Baba Hasani.

Kamberi is one of the most commanding representatives of the Moslem tradition in Albanian literature, though his main work, a 200-page *mexhmua* (verse collection), has disappeared. A manuscript of this collection is said to have been sent to Monastir (Bitola) in 1908-1910 to be published, but all traces of it have since been lost¹³. Indeed little of his verse has

¹¹ cf. Myderrizi 1957b.

¹² cf. Myderrizi 1955a.

¹³ cf. Shuteriqi 1976, p. 272.

survived and even less has been published. Of his works we do possess: a short *mevlûd*, a religious poem on the birth of the prophet Mohammed; about ten *ilâhî*, religious hymns; and over fifty secular poems.

The *mevlûd* of Hasan, son of Zyko Kamberi, as he calls himself, is probably one of the first to have been composed in Albanian and was no doubt influenced by that of the Turkish poet Süleyman Çelebi¹⁴ (d. 1422). A copy of Kamberi's *mevlûd*, consisting of fifty-one octosyllabic quatrains with an ABAB rhyme, is now preserved in the Central State Archives in Tiranë. Both in this work and in his other religious poems, one of which is devoted to the biblical story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar the Egyptian, we sense a talented poet who had a more than superficial knowledge of Moslem and Bektashi theology.

Kamberi's secular verse covers a wide range of themes. In his octosyllabic *Sefer-i humâyûn* (The king's campaign) in thirty-three quatrains, he describes his participation in the above-mentioned Battle of Smederevo and gives a realistic account of the suffering it caused. In *Bahti im* (My fortune) and *Vasijetnameja* (The testament) Kamberi casts an ironic and sometimes bitter glance at the vagaries of fate and in particular at the misfortunes of his own life. *Gjerdeku* (The bridal chamber) portrays marriage customs in the countryside. It is not a pastoral idyll we encounter here, but a realistic account of the anguish and hardship of young women married off according to custom without being able to choose husbands for themselves, and the suffering of young men forced to go abroad to make a living. In Kamberi's love lyrics, the author laments social conventions that inhibit passion and spontaneity. One shocked Kosovo critic has recently described them as "at times degenerate eroticism"¹⁵. The most famous of his poems is *Paraja* (Money), a caustic condemnation of feudal corruption and at the same time perhaps the best piece of satirical verse in pre-twentieth century Albanian literature. It begins as follows:

*"Mbreti, q'urdhëron dynjanë,
Që ka vënë taraphanë
E i presënë paranë,
Ja di kimenë parasë.*

*Dhe veziri, q'është veqil,
Zë sikur të bënet' adil
E mos thotë dot kaly-kil,
Ja di kimenë parasë.*

*Sheh Islami, q'ep fetfanë,
Që di qitapëtë ç'thanë,
Nukë kaçirdis paranë,
Ja di kimenë parasë.*

*Myfti edhe myderizë
Edhe kyrra e vaizë
Kanë ujdipur' iblizë,*

¹⁴ cf. Engelke 1926 and MacCallum 1943. Vernacular mevlûds also exist in Serbian, Greek and Circassian (Cherkess).

¹⁵ cf. Hysa 1987, p. 238.

Ja di kimenë parasë.

*Dhe kadiu i mehqemesë,
Që rri sipër sixhadesë,
Edhe shehu i teqesë,
Ja di kimenë parasë...*

*Dhe pashallarë, bejlerë,
Edhe avamë të tjerë,
Për para apënë krerë,
Ja di kimenë parasë...*

*Kadiut, t'i rrëfesh paranë,
Ters e vërtit sherianë,
Për para se ç'e shet t'anë,
Ja di kimenë parasë..."*

(The king who rules the world,
Who founded the mint
Where money is coined,
He knows the value of money.

And the vizier who is his deputy,
While pretending to be honest, has an open hand
And spreads no word about it,
He knows the value of money.

Sheik Islami who gives counsel
And knows the contents of legal tracts
Never misses an opportunity to make money,
He knows the value of money.

The mufti and the school director,
The scholar and the imam
Have come to terms with the devil,
They know the value of money.

And the judge in the courtroom
Sitting on his carpet
And the dervish in the monastery,
They know the value of money...

And the pashas and the beys
And the madding crowds
Lose their heads for a coin,
They know the value of money...

Show a coin to a judge

And he will reinterpret Koranic law,
For money he would sell his own father,
He knows the value of money...).

Kamberi's verse was very popular and spread by word of mouth in the nineteenth century. In the foreword to his Albanian translation of the first book of Homer's Iliad (Bucharest 1896), Naim Frashëri was to state, "Amongst the poets of Albania, Hasan Zyko Kamberi is the foremost." Kamberi's language is more supple and original than that of Frakulla and Naibi half a century before him and slightly less charged with oriental vocabulary. A critical edition of his works would be desirable.

The verse of Hasan Zyko Kamberi and even that of Nezim Frakulla were not devoid of social criticism, as we have seen, but it is to the Bektashi poet Zenel Bastari¹⁶ that we must turn for the first real ideological expression of social awareness in the literature of the *Bejtexhinj*. With the increasingly obvious inability of the Turkish authorities to cope with the collapsing Ottoman Empire, the feudal beys and pashas of Albania were vying for supremacy with increasing ferocity. The Bushatli dynasty had created a quasi-independent principality in northern Albania at the end of the eighteenth century and the pashalik of Ali Pasha Tepelena (1741-1822) in southern Albania and northern Greece had reached the zenith of its power by 1811. In the Tiranë region, the feudal Jellaj and Toptani families were competing for power, a struggle which Bastari experienced at first hand. With the economic situation becoming increasingly unstable and uprisings a common-place occurrence, the main victims of social conflict were of course the lower classes of society to which Bastari, as opposed to most of the other *Bejtexhinj*, seems to have belonged.

Zenel Bastari, also called Zenel Hyka, was born in the village of Bastar near Tiranë where he worked as a tailor and manual labourer in the early nineteenth century. Even the approximate dates of his birth and death are unknown. The only guideline for dating we have is a reference in one poem to the murder of Shemsedin Shemimiu of Fushë Krujë in 1831. Bastari was the author of about 200 quatrains of verse on social, religious, humorous and amorous themes. In *Tirana jonë si mësoi* (How our Tiranë learned) he openly denounces the oppression of the common people by unscrupulous landowners and feudal lords, a standard theme in much twentieth-century Albanian literature. *Meti Milla Rexhepit* (Meti, son of Mulla Rexhep) is a humorous portrayal, not without a good deal of biting sarcasm, of a corrupt and immoral official and cleric, a stereotyped though by no means unrealistic figure which was also to serve as a favourite target for political verse again and again in later Albanian literature.

Another major component of the poetic works of Zenel Bastari was the pantheistic mysticism of his Bektashi religion. Though Bektashi beliefs had been introduced into Albania by Turkish janissaries as early as the fifteenth century, it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that they spread among wide sections of the population of southern and central Albania. The *tekes* (monasteries) of the Bektashi, in particular those of Krujë, Korçë, Konicë, Frashër and Gjakovë, were soon to serve as covert centres of national culture, learning, tolerance and, at the same time, of resistance to Turkish rule. Bastari's creative talent evolved under the influence of Haxhi Ynçari, a spiritual leader of the Bektashi sect to whom much intellectual authority was attributed at the time. He viewed the gift of poetry as *hidâyet-i hak* (divine inspiration) enabling him to reach the sublime, *nûr* (grace, splendour). Bastari professes his faith in *Mbi Bektashizmin* (On Bektashism), a poem in fourteen quatrains, which begins as

¹⁶ cf. Gjyli 1961 and Hysa 1987b.

follows:

”Ashku i perverdigjarit
Më ka bamun mu shahir,
Nuri i Haxhi Ynçarit
S’e di punën ti zahir.”

The love of God
Made a poet of me,
The grace of Haxhi Ynçari
Knows no other work.

Bastari’s love lyrics, like those of Nezim Frakulla, contain many of the standard figures and metaphors of the oriental *ghazal*, for instance the poet suffering from a broken heart, an illness for which there is no remedy. Of love, he notes *Kjo hazine asht xhemal, hem gjynah e hem sevap* (This treasure offers beautiful prospects, both sin and merit).

Bastari’s contemporary Muhamet Kyçyku¹⁷ (1784-1844) marks the transition between the classical verse of the early *Bejtexhinj* and the Rilindja poets of the second half of the nineteenth century. Kyçyku, who is also known as Muhamet Çami, i.e. the Çamian, was from Konispol in what is now the southern tip of Albania. He studied theology for eleven years in Cairo where a sizeable Albanian colony had settled. On his return to his native village he served as a hodja and died in 1844 [1260 A.H.].

Kyçyku was a relatively prolific author who wrote in his native Çamian dialect and, as it seems, was the first Albanian author to have written longer poetry. The work for which he is best remembered is a romantic tale in verse form known as *Erveheja* (Ervehe), originally entitled *Ravda* (Garden), written about 1820. This poetic tale in octosyllabic quatrains with an ABAB rhyme follows the adventures of the fair Ervehe who manages to defend her chastity and virtue through many a trial and tribulation. Ervehe’s husband goes abroad, leaving her to the care of his brother who, despite his promises, attempts to seduce her. Ervehe resists both his advances and his threats to kill her if she does not yield. The frustrated brother takes vengeance on Ervehe by falsely accusing her of adultery and she is sentenced under Koranic law to be stoned to death. By a miracle Ervehe survives her lapidation and is picked out of the rubble, severely injured, by a passing nobleman who hears her lament and takes her home to his wife. Ervehe recovers from the ordeal only to have the nobleman too fall victim to her charms. She refuses his advances as well, telling him she is married, which suffices to put him off. Later, a servant in the house attempts to seduce Ervehe and is also repulsed. He takes vengeance on her by killing the nobleman’s son and accusing Ervehe of the crime. The matter is clarified but the nobleman, though convinced of her innocence, is obliged to dismiss Ervehe from his household, giving her 400 pieces of gold as her parting wages. Poor Ervehe’s misfortunes do not end here. While wandering along a river bank, she encounters a thief who is about to be hanged for having stolen 400 pieces of gold from the king’s treasury. She takes pity on him and saves his life with the money she earned. The thief follows her and begs her to become his wife. When she refuses, he ungratefully sells her as a slave to the captain of a ship who also attempts to seduce her. A storm arises in the nick of time and drowns all on board except Ervehe who is washed up onto the

¹⁷ cf. F. Fishta 1940b, Rossi 1948, Myderrizi 1951a, 1957a, Hetzer 1983b, 1984a, and Vehbiu 1989.

shore of a strange city. A pious man lends her his clothes and, in male dress, she presents herself to the king of the country who receives her cordially and has a house built for her. Here she takes care of the sick and the blind, and becomes the object of veneration for her good deeds. Indeed when the king dies, Ervehe is chosen as his successor. One day, five strangers arrive at her court: her husband and his brother, the nobleman, the servant and the thief, the latter three now blind. Ervehe promises to heal them if they confess all their sins (*gjynah*). The injustice perpetrated against Ervehe thus becomes known and she can now reveal herself to her husband as the woman of chastity and virtue she has always been.

The motif in this moralistic tale of ‘female virtue’ occurs widely in both oriental and Western literature. The most likely source for Kyçyku’s poetic version of the tale is the Persian *Tûtî-nâme* (Tales of a Parrot) by Ziyâ’uddîn Nakhshabî, inspired by a Sanskrit original, the *Shukasaptati*. The seventeen-page Albanian text consists of 856 lines of verse and is preserved in the National Library in Tiranë. It is also one of the rare works of the *Bejtexhinj* to have been published in the 19th century, though in an altered version. Rilindja publicist Jani Vreto (1822-1900) not only transliterated and published *Erveheja* in Bucharest in 1888, but adapted it to late 19th century tastes and saw fit to purge it of all its Turkish, Persian and Arabic vocabulary. The original version is more straightforward and preserves the unadorned narrative character of a poetic fable whereas Vreto’s edition endeavours to present the work more in epic form with appropriate epithets.

Erveheja is not Kyçyku’s only surviving work, though it was the only one known for many years. Most of the over 4,000 lines of his verse (ca. 200 pages) we possess have been discovered within the last forty years. Kyçyku’s other major work is *Jusufi i Zelihaja* (Joseph and Zeliha), a moralistic verse tale in 2,430 lines based on the biblical story recounted in Genesis 39 and the twelfth Sura of the Koran, of the attempted seduction of the handsome Joseph by the wife of his Egyptian master Potiphar. This ‘most beautiful tale’, as the Koran calls it, served as a common motif in Arabic, Persian and Turkish literature. It was adapted, in particular, by the Persian epic poet Firdausî (ca. 935-1020) and later by the mystical writer Jâmî (1414-1492) in *Yûsuf and Zulaykhâ*. The biblical Joseph is in some respects the male counterpart of Ervehe. He, too, suffers much at the hands of his family and enemies and yet steadfastly resists the advances of his master’s wife in order to remain chaste and virtuous. Kyçyku’s *Jusufi i Zelihaja* evinces a higher level of literary sophistication than *Erveheja*. Its language is more ornate and many of the descriptive passages transcend the constraints of a simple narrative. It also relies more on character analysis as a means of conveying dramatic suspense, in particular with respect to the passions of the enamoured Zeliha.

Muhamet Kyçyku is the author of several other poems of note, one of which is a 348-line work in octosyllabic quatrains usually entitled *Bekriu*, in which its Moslem author condemns the drinking of wine and raki. A reference to the year 1824 [1239 A.H.] and to the name of the author occurs in the poem, thus making it the earliest of Kyçyku’s works we can date precisely. An historical poem dated 1826 [1241 A.H.], an attempt by Kyçyku at a more epic scale, glorifies the campaigns of Ibrahim Pasha (1789-1848), stepson of Mohammed Ali, viceroy of Egypt, during the Greek war of liberation. It contains, in particular, descriptions of the battles for Athens and Missolonghi (1822). A 100-line poem known as *Gurbetlitë* (The emigrants) deals with the plight of those Albanians forced to leave their homeland in search of work and a better life abroad, a theme taken up in many works of later Albanian literature. Kyçyku who, as we have noted, lived and studied in Egypt for eleven years, also devoted his energy to the translation of religious literature from Arabic and Turkish. Of such works, we possess an Albanian version of the *Kasîdatu ‘l-Burda* (The ode of the gown) by the Arabic poet of Berber origin, Al-Busîrî (d. 1296), a classical panegyric on the prophet Mohammed.

Tahir Boshnjaku¹⁸, also called *Tahir efendi Gjakova* or *Efendiu i Madh* (The Great Efendi), was a Moslem writer from Gjakovë (Djakovica) in the first half of the nineteenth century. He studied theology in Istanbul and returned to Kosovo to teach at the 'Small School' in Gjakovë. His name *Boshnjaku*, 'the Bosnian', may be an indication either that he was originally from Bosnia or at least from the Plavë and Guci region, then part of Bosnia, or that he had travelled widely there. At any rate, he is the author of a 328-line work entitled *Vehbije* (Offering) or *Emni Vehbijje* dated 1835 [1251 A.H.], a collection of disciplined verse in Arabic metre interspersed with prose, dealing with religious and philosophical problems such as the futility of existence, heaven and hell, the duties of man and the place of knowledge. It was (badly) transliterated into the Istanbul alphabet by one Ismail Haxhi Tahir Gjakovës and printed in Sofia in 1907.

The trend towards longer verse and the rudiments of the literary epic which we have observed in Muhamet Kyçyku were furthered by two brothers from the southern Albanian village of Frashër. Dalip Frashëri¹⁹ was a Bektashi monk who received his training at the noted Bektashi *teke* of Frashër, founded in 1824 by Tahir Nasibiu (d. 1835). Nasibiu sent his disciple to Konicë where Dalip Frashëri headed a *teke* himself and wrote a literary epic in Albanian. This 65,000-line *Hadikaja* (The garden), written under the pseudonym of *Hyxhretiu* (The exile), was finished in 1842 [1258 A.H.]. The epic is based on another work of the same title by the Azerbaijan poet Fuzûlî (1494-1556), the greatest representative of Turkish *divan* lyrics. The Albanian *Hadikaja*, divided into ten cantos plus introduction and conclusion, is twice as long as the Azeri Turkish version and constitutes the first real Albanian literary epic. It was composed primarily in octosyllabic quatrains with an ABAB rhyme, though these are interspersed with some six-syllable verse. The manuscript is preserved in the Central State Archives in Tiranë²⁰. *Hadikaja* deals not only with the history of the Bektashi in Albania, but also, like Fuzûlî's *Hadîqatû as-su'adâ*, with events of Shi'ite Moslem history, notably with the Battle of Kerbela in Iraq in 680 A.D. in which Husein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, was killed. Dalip's younger brother Shahin Bey Frashëri also tried his hand at a Bektashi epic. His 12,000-line *Myhtarnameja* (The tale of Myhtar), as yet unpublished, also deals with Shi'ite Moslem history and the aforementioned Battle of Kerbela, of which Myhtar was one of the protagonists. This epic, of which several copies are known, was finished in 1868 and appears to have been based on a Persian original and influenced by an intermediate Turkish version. Rilindja poet Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) who, though from the same village, was not a direct relative of the aforementioned brothers, seems to have been inspired by the *Hadikaja* and *Myhtarnameja* in composing his own Bektashi epic *Qerbelaja*, Bucharest 1898 (Kerbela). The two works are often cited by literary historians, in particular in connection with Naim Frashëri, but seldom if ever have they actually been read since only very short excerpts of *Hadikaja* have been published so far. A critical edition of these two epics would be of great assistance to their proper evaluation.

4. *Minor writers of the period*

¹⁸ cf. Kaleshi 1956, 1966-67, and Ajeti 1960 and 1962.

¹⁹ cf. Myderrizi 1955b.

²⁰ cf. Shuteriqi 1976, p. 226-228.

We know of a number of other early Moslem poets whose works have only survived in part or not at all. Dervish Hasani from Krusha e Vogël near Rahovec in Kosovo, who lived towards the end of the seventeenth century, is the author of the oldest Albanian verse in Arabic script to have been written in Kosovo. He was a dervish at the great Halveti *teke* in Rahovec which was founded by Sheh (Sheik) Sulejman Ejup Dede of Potočan in the 1680s. Little remains of his mystical verse. Sulejman Temani, poet and Halveti sheik from Berat, is also the author of several pieces of religious verse. Haxhi Ymer Mustafa Kashari from Tiranë, born at the beginning of the eighteenth century, wrote religious poetry in Albanian and Turkish. His Albanian verse, though heavily laden with oriental vocabulary, constitutes the oldest document in Tiranë dialect. One eighteen-line *ilâhî* by the mid-eighteenth or early nineteenth century Mulla Beqiri, mufti of the *medresa* of Vuçitërnë in Kosovo, and two love poems by Omer efendi Sadeddin of southern Albania have survived. From the flourishing Moslem cultural centres of Berat and Elbasan we have records of a few contemporaries of Nezim Frakulla. Ismail Pasha Velabishti, Frakulla's above-mentioned patron from Berat, who was murdered on 3 August 1764 in Vlorë, has left us an octosyllabic poem he wrote as commander of the fortress of Lepanto in which he expresses a longing for his homeland. From Elbasan we have poems by Ibrahim Elbasani and Sulejman Pasha Vërlaci, also known as *Sulejman Pasha Elbasani*. From Shkodër we know of Mulla Salih Pata who flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century as a poet at the court of the Bushatis. He is the author of satirical *bejts*, two of which are dedicated to Kara Mahmud Pasha. Also at the court of the Bushatis no doubt was his contemporary, Mulla Hysen Dobraçi of Shkodër, who is probably identical to one Hysen efendi Shkodra, the author of verse exalting Albanian resistance to Ottoman rule. Folklorist and writer Zef Jubani (1818-1880), who published some of Dobraçi's poetry in his *Raccolta di canti popolari e rapsodie di poemi albanesi*, Trieste 1881 (Collection of folksongs and rhapsodies of Albanian poems), called him the 'Albanian Anacreon'. Dobraçi's best known poem celebrates the battle of Kara Mahmud Pasha against Turkish forces under Ahmed Pasha in Berat in 1785. An anonymous author from Gjirokastër²¹ has also left us a poem about the attack on that city by Ali Pasha Tepelena (1741-1822) around the year 1793.

In the early nineteenth century, too, much religious and some historical verse in the Moslem tradition was composed by writers about whom we have very little information. Elmaz Gjirokastriti was the author of a ninety-two-line poem bearing the Turkish title *Evvel hastalık* (The first disease), dealing with the epidemic which raged in the Gjirokastër area in 1817. It was written in 1820 and is preserved in a manuscript from Gjirokastër. Haxhi Etëhem bej Tirana (1783-1846), also known as *Etëhem bej Mollai*, was the author of Bektashi mystical verse and a divan in Albanian, of which nothing has survived, as well as of four divans in Turkish. He died in Tiranë and was interred in the mosque still bearing his name in the heart of the Albanian capital. Another poet of Bektashi inspiration was Baba Abdullah Melçani (d. 1852) who founded the great *teke* of Melçani near Korçë and was active in the nationalist movement. Of his mystical verse in Albanian, only one poem dedicated to the legendary Sari Salltëk Baba has survived. Mulla Dervish Peja also called Dervish efendi of Pejë (Peć), was a respected religious figure of the early nineteenth century who was known in oral tradition for the wisdom expressed in his couplets and sayings. Only one of his poems has survived. Nothing at all has been recovered of the religious verse of Ahmet Elbasani, a sheik from Elbasan. Hysen Bitri, a poet from the Bektashi stronghold of Krujë, was the author of three religious poems in Albanian written before the murder of the spiritual leader Shemsedin Shemimiu of Fushë Krujë in 1831. Poet Asllan bej

²¹ cf. Myderrizi 1959.

Puçe (1807-1830) was the son of Ago Myhyrdari who was secretary to Ali Pasha Tepelena. He died in the massacre of Monastir (Bitola) on 30 August 1830 at the age of twenty-three, together with other Albanian nobles. Nothing has survived of his works. Also from southern Albania was Abdullah Sulejman Konispoli, author of a *mevlûd* in Çamian dialect written about 1831 and preserved in the Central State Archives in Tiranë, and of other verse including poetry translations from Arabic and Turkish. Ahmet Tusi, a sheik of the Rufai sect, left some religious verse in Albanian from about 1836. Little is known of Ismail Floqi from the Korçë region, translator of a *mevlûd*, and of poet Jonuz efendi Sabriu. Tahir Nasibiu (d. 1835) was founder of the Bektashi *teke* of Frashër in 1825 and is said to have written poetry in Albanian, Persian and Turkish, nothing of which has survived. Verse of historical interest is preserved by Mulla Fejzo Abdalli of Gjirokastër, author of a poem dated 1841 [1257 A.H.] about a battle against a Turkish pasha during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), and by Demir Vlonjati (d. 1845), also known as Demir aga Vlonjakasi, author of an octosyllabic poem in nineteen quatrains dated 1845 [1261 A.H.] in which he decries a massacre in Vlorë perpetrated that year by Turkish forces and the suffering caused in Albania by the Tanzimat reform legislation.

One curious literary tradition of the Orient is that of dictionaries in verse form. The first such Albanian-Turkish dictionary, as noted above, was written by Nezim Frakulla. In the year 1835 [1251 A.H.], Shemimi Shkodra or Shemimiu of Shkodër completed an Albanian-Turkish dictionary²² with about 1,000 entries entitled *Nytkë* (Speech). According to its author, the dictionary was to serve the needs of Turkish soldiers in Albania and of Albanians who knew no Turkish. The Albanian dialect is that of Shkodër mixed with elements from Berat, leading us to the assumption that the author lived in Berat for some time. This interest in lexicography follows in the tradition of eighteenth-century Myslim Hoxha from the village of Levan near Fier who was the author of an Albanian adaptation of the *Tyfhë-i Şâhidî* (The gift of Şâhidî), a Persian-Turkish dictionary composed in 1514 [920 A.H.] by Ibrâhîm Şâhidî Dede, a Mevlevî dervish from Mughla who died in 1550 [957 A.H.]. It contained several thousand entries.

Albanian prose texts in Arabic script were extremely rare. One such work, dated 1840 [1256 A.H.], is a religious translation from the Arabic by Mehmet Iljaz Korça. The work is contained in a manuscript originally from Korçë which was discovered in 1953 and is now preserved in the Central State Archives in Tiranë.

5. Conclusion

The Albanian *Bejtexhinj* were, on the whole, not poets of the calibre of the Persian and Arabic classics, whose literary sophistication derived from a millennium of refined oriental civilization. They were, however, inventive and talented minstrels who created both a new Albanian literature based on the Islamic traditions of the Orient and a new, as yet unpolished literary language.

Albanian literature was written in Arabic script for over two centuries in all. It flourished throughout the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century until it was gradually replaced by the romantic nationalist literature of the Rilindja period, written primarily in a number of newly devised versions of the Latin alphabet. In its early stages, the poetry of the *Bejtexhinj*, like much Ottoman divan verse, was primarily a literature of erudition and technique. As such, it remained a vehicle directed to the interests of an élite minority, be it social, clerical or

²² cf. Myderrizi 1951b and Rossi 1951.

political, and, with time, lost its ability to express the dreams and aspirations of the Albanian people. The waning of the Moslem tradition in Albanian literature was concomitant with the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Albanian nationalist movement during which the Albanians began to turn their backs on all things Ottoman and oriental. Turkish was the language of the invader and Arabic script came to be seen by many as an attribute of foreign cultural imperialism amongst a people slowly awakening and striving for self-determination. Only a new Western alphabet, Western ideas and consequently a more European-oriented literature could help Albania resist cultural assimilation by the Turks. The literature of the *Bejtexhinj*, as a result, turned inward upon itself and exhibited an increasingly religious orientation in the second half of the nineteenth century, notably in the cultural wake of the Bektashi. Indeed this literature survived marginally well into the twentieth century. The Moslem tradition was kept up in Kosovo in particular, where verse was still being written in Arabic script as late as 1947.

Of all the periods of Albanian writing, that of the *Bejtexhinj* remains perhaps the least known, both by scholars and by the Albanian reading public. The manuscripts, as mentioned above, are for the most part lost or inaccessible, and there is a conspicuous dearth of qualified experts able to deal with what might be retrieved. At present, there are no Albanian experts with a sufficient knowledge of Ottoman Turkish and of Arabic script, and very few foreign Orientalists with a sufficient knowledge of Albanian to be able to deal with this literature on a scholarly basis. Nor did it find much favour among critics and readers in socialist Albania because of its fundamentally religious fixation, elitist background, adherence to classical conventions and alien form (the language of the occupant). The modern reader will find the mixture of Albanian, Turkish and Persian taxing, to say the least. The Moslem literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is nonetheless an integral part of Albania's cultural heritage, a component which remains to be properly appreciated and indeed to a large extent to be discovered.

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