

“The Songs of the Frontier Warriors” Albanian Oral Epic Verse

The best-known cycle of Albanian oral epic verse, the “Songs of the Frontier Warriors” (*Këngë Kreshnikësh*), is the product of a little-known culture and a difficult, rarely studied language. As such, the Albanian epic has tended to remain in the shadow of the Serbo-Croatian, or more properly, Bosnian epic, with which it has undeniable affinities.

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 a border region of the Balkans which separated Christendom from the Islamic world, though many much older strata are present in the songs. We are dealing, as such, primarily with a literary reflection of the *Türkenkriege*, the wars 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, Jutbina and New Kotor etc., have been identified as being in the region of the Lika and Krbava valleys to the east of Zadar in Croatia, not far from the present Bosnian border. Reference is also made to the River Danube and to Hungarian guards and clothing, all of which are remote from areas of traditional Albanian settlement. From this and from conspicuous Slavic terms in some of the songs, it would seem evident that we are dealing with a body of oral material which, probably after centuries of evolution, crystallized in a southern Slavic milieu and was then transmitted by bilingual singers to (some would say back to) an Albanian milieu. It is understandable therefore 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.

Albanian scholars, ever ready to assert the antecendence of their culture over that of the Slav, 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.

Despite transmission from a Bosnian Slav milieu, the “Songs of the Frontier Warriors” are by no means simply translations of Serbo-Croatian epic verse. They have undergone continuous and independent evolution since the period of crystallization and are thus neither Bosnian, Montenegrin, Hercegovinian, Serb, nor southern Albanian for that matter, but a product of the creative genius of the northern Albanian highlands.

The “Songs of the Frontier Warriors” were first recorded in the early decades of the twentieth century by Franciscan priests and scholars serving in the northern Albanian mountains. Preeminent among them was Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874-1929), who is now regarded as the father of Albanian folklore studies. Gjeçovi was born in Janjeva, south of Prishtina in Kosova, and was educated by the Franciscans in Bosnia. He returned to Albania in 1896, having been ordained as a priest, and spent his most productive years (ca. 1905-1920) among the highland tribes in various rugged mountain settlements where he collected and compiled material on oral literature, tribal law, archaeology and folklore in general. Though he is remembered primarily for his codification of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, the best known code of Albanian customary law, his achievements in the field of oral literature are actually no less impressive.

From 1919 onwards, Gjeçovi’s work in the collection of oral verse was continued by another Albanian Franciscan, Bernardin Palaj (1894-1947). Born in the Shllak region of the northern highlands and trained in Austria, Palaj was ordained in 1918. Like Gjeçovi, he collected folk songs on his travels on foot through the mountains, and wrote articles on Gheg (northern Albanian) lore and tribal customs. He was particularly taken by the “Songs of the Frontier Warriors,” to which he devoted much of his energy. Together with Donat Kurti (1903-1983), he published the most important collection of Albanian epic verse to date, the *Kângë kreshnikësh dhe legenda* (Songs of the Frontier Warriors and Legends), which appeared in Tirana in the *Visaret e Kombit* (The Treasures of the Nation) series in 1937 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Albanian independence.

The work of the Franciscans and Jesuits in Shkodra gave direction to the study of Albanian culture from the late nineteenth century up until the Second World War. It was their research that inspired Father Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), another Franciscan scholar and poet, to write his masterful 15,613-line literary epic *Lahuta e Malcis* (The Highland Lute), which was published in a definitive edition in the same year as the aforementioned collection of Palaj and Kurti.

This golden age of Scutarine culture and scholarship was brought to an abrupt end by the communist takeover of Albania in 1944. All the cultural and educational institutions of the Catholic Church were shut down and most of Albania’s best scholars and writers, among whom were Bernardin Palaj, Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951), Vinçenc Prennushi (1885-1949), Anton Harapi (1888-1946) and Gjon Shllaku (1907-1946), were physically liquidated or died in prison. The immediate post-war period had become an apocalypse for Albanian writers and intellectuals. The father of Albanian folklore, Shtjefën Gjeçovi, for his part, had been murdered by Serb extremists two decades earlier near Zym in Kosova.

Research in the field of Albanian oral literature resumed in Albania in the 1950s with the founding of the Albanian Institute of Sciences in Tirana, forerunner of the Academy of Sciences. A new generation of experts was trained, expeditions to the north were carried out, and a series of monographs and anthologies was published, which documented the results of research activities. In 1961, a special Folklore Institute (*Instituti i Kulturës Popullore*) was set up in Tirana which, despite the continued political isolation of the country, managed to carry on research and publishing activities at a satisfactory scholarly level. Here, the Albanian epic has been the focus of research in particular by Zihni Sako (1912-1981), Qemal Haxhihasani (1916-1991), Gjergj Zheji (b. 1926), Alfred Uçi (b. 1930), Jorgo Panajoti (b. 1936), and

Shaban Sinani (b. 1959).

Equally or perhaps more significant for Albanian oral literature was the foundation in 1967 of the Albanological Institute (*Instituti Albanologjik*) in Prishtina. The Folklore Section of this institute has published a good number of works on the Albanian epic. Despite the forceful eviction of the Institute from its premises, the savage beating of scholars and staff members by Serb paramilitaries on 8 March 1994, and the wilful destruction of much Albanian folklore material and recordings during the final grim months of the Serb occupation of Kosova, the Albanological Institute has survived and is continuing its work. Mention may be made in particular of the publications of Anton Çetta (1920-1995), Demush Shala (1929-1988), Rrustem Berisha (b. 1938), Anton Berisha (b. 1946), Zymer Neziri (b. 1946) and Enver Mehmeti (b. 1948).

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. A few good introductory monographs on the subject have, nonetheless, appeared in English. Among them are: *Albanian and South Slavic Oral Epic Poetry* (Philadelphia 1954, New York 1969) by Stavro Skendi (1905-1989), *Albanian Folk Verse, Structure and Genre* (Munich 1978) by Arshi Pipa (1920-1997), and most recently *The Bilingual Singer, a Study of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic Traditions* (New York 1990) by John Kolsti of the University of Texas in Austin. Still of use is the German-language *Die Volksepik der Albaner* (Halle 1958) by Maximilian Lambertz (1882-1963). I hope to add to this tradition shortly with a new English translation of Albanian epic verse under the title *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: Albanian Epic Verse in a Bilingual English-Albanian Edition* (Wauconda 2003)¹.

As I stated initially, the southern Slavic epic has enjoyed much more international attention than the Albanian. In addition to the obvious fact that very few foreigners understand Albanian or bother to learn it, Albania as a country and Albanian culture in general have traditionally been much more remote and isolated from the Western world than Yugoslavia and the cultures of the southern Slavs.

It was the Homeric scholar Milman Parry and his assistant Albert Lord from Harvard University who captured the imagination of a whole generation of scholars with their discovery of illiterate bards in Bosnia and the Sandjak who, in true Homeric fashion, were able to recite epic verse for hours on end. It is widely assumed, by the way, that Parry and Lord served as models for the protagonists in the novel *The File on H* by Albanian writer Ismail Kadare². Milman Parry, who was originally primarily interested in Homer, was fascinated by the formulas, the formulaic expressions which enabled the singers to recite for hours without having learnt the text of their epics by heart. His work on formulas in southern Slavic epic literature proved immensely influential to our understanding of how oral epics arise and how they are transmitted.

¹ *Songs of the Frontier Warriors: the Albanian Epic 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. ISBN 0-86516-412-6 (Bolchazy-Carducci, Wauconda 2003), 416 pp.

² Ismail Kadare, *The File on H*. Translated by David Bellos from the French version of the Albanian by Jusuf Vrioni. ISBN 1-86046-257-X, (Harvill Press, London 1997), 171 pp. Albanian version *Dosja H: Roman* (Naim Frashëri, Tirana / Rilindja, Prishtina, 1990) 232 pp.

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 sojourn in Bosnia, Hercegovina, Montenegro and the Sandjak, 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)³.

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 Sandjak were willing and able to reproduce the same epic songs in Bosnian (Serbo-Croatian) and in 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 Djerdjelez 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.⁴”

As to the Milman Parry Collection, it is evident that most scholars who visit Harvard to see it are interested only in the Serbo-Croatian material. And yet, the unpublished Lord Collection of Albanian material there is quite unique. It consists of 12 notebooks which Albert Lord compiled in 1937. These handwritten booklets comprise 53 heroic songs, 4 ballads, 18 historical songs and 2 lyric songs - a total of 22,645 lines of verse. Of this total,

³ Milman Parry & 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 / Belgrade: Srpska Akademija Nauka, 1954, 1953), 479 + 448 pp.

⁴ ‘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.

20,445 lines, or about 90 percent, may be considered epic or heroic verse of the “Frontier Warrior” type. Recorded in this collection are songs from the Malësia e Madhe, in particular from Kelmendi, Plava and Gucia, as well as from Shala, Merturi, the Malësia e Vogël, and Rugova. The longest song in the collection is 2,100 lines. In addition to the notebooks, the Milman Parry Collection also has some audio recordings in Albanian. After gathering dust for 65 years, the Albanian material is now finally to be digitised, published and made available to the public. An international project has recently been initiated to this end, and, if all things go as planned, it is to be concluded by September 2004.

The Serbo-Croatian 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 in these early years of the twenty-first century, one can still find a good number of *lahutars* in Kosova, 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!

Unfortunately, the 1997-1999 war in Kosova left deep scars, in particular in the present homeland of epic verse, the Rugova highlands. Many Albanian villages there were destroyed by their Slav neighbours who had come over the mountains from nearby Montenegro to raid and plunder. Most other settlements were systematically razed to the ground by Serb troops and paramilitaries. The whole population was put to flight, with many villagers having to escape on foot in the deep snows of winter. Countless Albanians were robbed, raped and murdered as they fled their smouldering villages, and it is easy to imagine that the toll was heaviest among the elderly people. It is still too early to assess the impact of this wanton destruction upon the traditional tribal culture of the Rugova highlands. The Albanians of Kosova are, however, extremely attached to their country and their national traditions, much more so than are the people of the Republic of Albania. In Albania itself, the native culture of the northern mountains was given the last blow, so to speak, by the 1997 uprising which resulted in a final wave of mass emigration of the highland population to the shantytowns of Tirana, Durrës and other coastal cities.

In order to preserve the heritage of these last native singers of epic verse in Europe, the Albanological Institute of Prishtina embarked in 1979-1988 on an ambitious publishing project entitled *Epika Legjendare e Rugovës* (The Legendary Epic of Rugova), based on over 100,000 lines of material collected. Each volume in the series is devoted to one singer and his works, and is thus designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of Albanian epic and heroic verse before its inevitable extinction. Because of the deteriorating political situation in Kosova and Yugoslavia through the eighties and nineties, leading to the 1997-1999 war, only one volume has appeared as yet. This was devoted to the *lahutar* Haxhi Meta-Nilaj (1912-1994) of Shtupeq i Vogël. Among other leading *lahutars* of the region are Ramë Çausi-Elesaliaj (1908-2000) of Shtupeq i Madh, Misin Nimani-Sejdaj (b. 1912) of Kuqishta, Rustem Tahiri-Metujkaj (1919-2000) of Rieka e Allagës, Isuf Veseli-Dreshaj (1926-2000) of Bogët, Rustem Bajrami-Imeraliaj (b. 1932) of Shtupeq i Madh, and Isë Elezi-Lekëgjekaj (b. 1947) of Koshutan. Mustafë Isufi-Broçaj (1939-1998) of Shtupeq i Vogël, student of the

noted *lahutar* Shaban Groshi-Husaj (1923-1997) of Shkreli, was shot, together with his sister, by the Serbs. Although some of the recorded field material at the Albanological Institute may have been destroyed by Serb forces who occupied the building in the spring of 1999, it is to be hoped that a substantial part of the project can still be completed. At the present time, there is only the crucial matter of funding.

Things are thus on the move. It is to be hoped that further books in the “Legendary Epic of Rugova” series will be published in Prishtina and that, secondly, the Lord Collection at Harvard will soon be made available. Thirdly - and equally important - it would be more than desirable for at least part of the Albanian material to be translated into English. If all these things are accomplished in the coming few years, the Albanian “Songs of the Frontier Warriors” will finally be able to take their place beside the better-known Serbo-Croatian material, not only as equal representatives of the astonishing tradition of Balkan epic literature, but also as the final voice and closing chapter in the long and dramatic history of European oral epic verse.

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