

2.7. EPOS OF ALBANIANS

The North Albanian epos, or the cycle of heroes, was brought to the attention of scholars a century ago. It was manifested precisely at the end of the epoch of National Renaissance, which has been justly called a century of the “*the cult of epopee*” (epic poem).

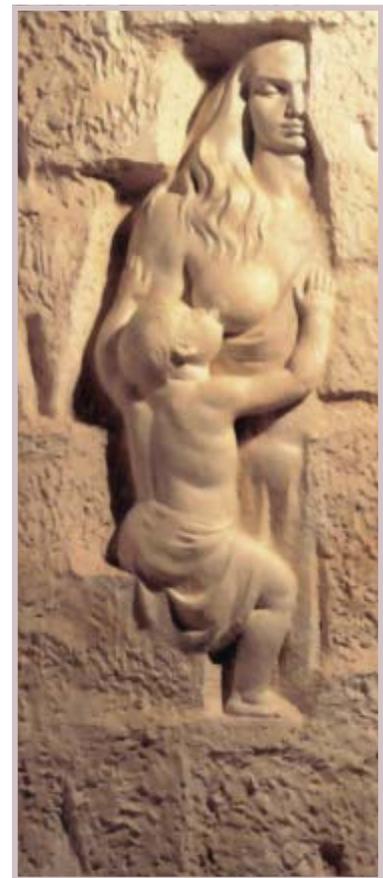
Albanian epos is known as the “Balad (song) of Heros”. It is an anthology dedicated to the Hero song which for the first time was translated in 2004 by Canadians Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck.

Albanian literature was born and developed at great length as the *literature of heroes*. Those who were not aware of the existence of the oral tradition of the epos of heroes tried to create “*fictional/imaginary epopees*” and introduce them as oral heritage. Later on, there were attempts at recreating a complete epopee according to the pattern of poems of antiquity. During the 19th century the Albanian conception was dominated by the mystification of James Macpherson’s style. As the “bravements’s” epos was not recognized, the most famous poets tried to call their writings *epopee* (De Rađa). The romantic mystification persisted until the mid 20th century, when Father Gjergj Fishta completed his precious epo-historic poem entitled “The Highland Lute” (Lahuta e Malesise) which according to Maximilian Lambertz’s point of view represents the “great epopee” of the Albanian people.

In the Albanian epos, like in any other epos, time runs *in accordance with a calendar different from that of humans*, which reminds one of the mentality of “*The Feats of Gilgamesh*” where *one day in the time of deities is as much as a thousand years in the time of humans*. Mythological heroes of the Albanian epos remain dead for a hundred years and upon waking they say, “*I have been taking a nap*”. As Muj, one of the main heroes, meditates, he “*is able to observe the grass growing*”. In the epos there is only a distant and undefined past, as time in the mythological imagination does not mimic human time. Heroes of the Epos are cultural, not historical. They do not consider themselves as heroes – a term given to them by scholars - Agha (title of the aristocratic Ottoman army). There are, however, some heroic titles in the epos. One is that of “Gjergj Elez Ali” who should protect his forefathers land “from



“Albania Fantastica” by Ibrahim Kodra, 1997



Rozafa- woman sacrifice to protect the castle walls, Shkodra. Sculpture by Skender Kraja

a risk that comes from the sea". Such a risk is presented through the wildness of the West kingdoms, especially through that of Venice. In the epos, executives of Saint Mark's Republic are converted into monsters: emissaries and envoys are seen as giants, ambassadors as demons, legates as ghosts.



"Muji" from the cycle of Albanian Epos "Muji and maids". Illustrated by Gazmend Leka

The risk that comes from the sea pertains to a later strata, and the earliest is related to the name of "Black Moor" similar to Moresques in "Sidi's Song" (Spain) and Moraines in "Roland's Songs" (France). The name of the Black Moor appears in other forms as well, such as Harambash, Arab pacha, Black Arap, etc

For the heroes of Muji and Halili's file, "the two Diokurse brothers", according to Lambertz are heroes who protect their country from a risk that comes from land. Here it is shown the perpetual and universal conflict known as the conflict of Behemot and Leviatan (in the Bible), the conflict of Iran and Turan (in Shah Name), the conflict of tallasocracy and tellurocracy (in ancient and modern geopolitics).

Two important features of the Northern mythological style testify the remote ancientness of the Albanian epos: *their matriarchal and chthonic (earthly) character*. This is another aspect of the question of autochthony – or allochthony – of the population that has created them. In contrast, the Hellenic epos deities are matriarchal and patriarchal. They coexist and conflict, win and suffer defeat, fight for power and protect it. The cycle of Artrides ends in the tragic dilemma of Orestes, who has to break through a tradition and establish a new one: *protect the right of fatherhood against that of motherhood*. The heroes of Albanian epos are the sons of Ajkuna. Quite unlike the cycle of ballads, where "a wise old man", advising a sacrifice of the bride over the bridge, reminds one of the *patriarch*, in Albanian epos there is no patriarch. For the first time, the father in the epos appears in the figure of Muj, as contrasted to Omer (or "seven Omers"). In one of the songs, Omer has to release "father and uncle" from the king's prison. The rhapsodist entitled the song "Omer from Muj" and this is the only case where a shade of a patriarch appears. Ajkuna plays the central figure and authoritative role. Muj and Halil do not have a father in formal terms; they are sons of the same mother running the house and they take their power from the deities. After Omer, there are no more heroes. Their power and glory is not inherited.

The matriarchal feature of mythological characters in legendary epics is made more emphatic by the general feeling of the rhapsody of Gjergj Elez Alia. It is commonly stated that, in this song, the Earth's powers are matched against the powers of the Sea ("a black

giant has emerged out of the sea). Traces of Byzantine culture have been found, such as is the exacting of tribute by the giant, as the laws of the empire government demanded. In fact, the main source of Gjergj Elez Alia's rhapsody is *the end of the era of human (woman) sacrifice for an act, campaign or tribute*. Gjergj Elez Alia rises from his deathbed to save an era from the morality inherited from the distant past when people could be sacrificed alive – as in the case of the *walled bride* in the Balkan ballads (ie. Rozafa of Shkodra). He beats the giant, who demands “a roast ram” and “a young maiden” every night. The defeat of the giant marks the end of that convention which legitimised woman sacrifice. Gjergj Elez Alia ensures a permanent deliverance of women from sacrifice.

The *chthonic* character of the deities of Albanian epos defines the *autochthonous* character of the people. Unlike Homeric poems, where the deities have a multilevel hierarchy (underground, semi-earthly — Persephone spends half of the year underground and the second half in the heavens – Chthonic and Uranic – earth), in Albanian epos this hierarchy does not exist. The mythological figures of the Albanian world are earthly. In narrative folklore, including the epic and tales, “*the seraph of heaven*” does not exist. Along with the “*earth nymph*” (of this earth), in the ethno-folkloric tradition of the country, fairy characters emerge and merge.

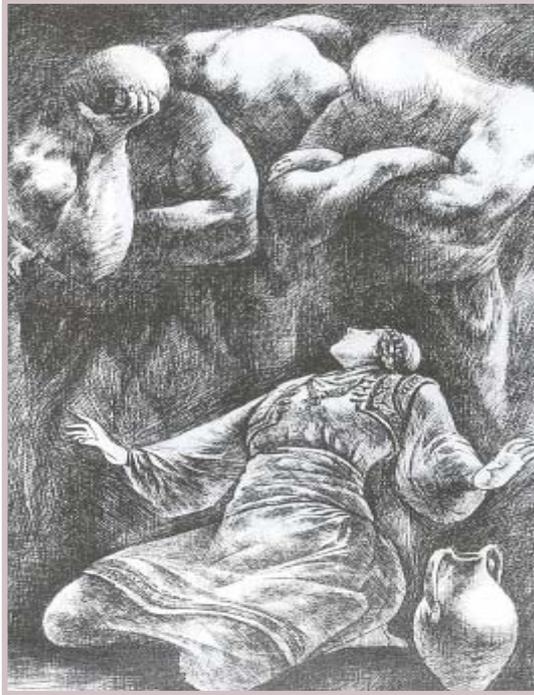
The chthonic feature of Albanian mythological actors in Albanian epos corresponds to that level of thought when, in Hellenic literature of antiquity “*Gods descended from the Olympus*”, and yet they remained important figures of the conscience of belief. This goes back to a later date than the Uranic (heavenly) sphere of mythological figures, however, earlier than the time when Greek Gods made a laughing stock of themselves in Aristophane's comedies.

“*The two calendars*” from the time in the epos and history of human life are connected with the distinctions between the mythological perception of time in the ancient and modern mentalities. One of the interesting folkloric facts in this regard is the *use of time for space* and vice-versa, which is viewed as a universal feature of the epos. In Albanian epos, distance is usually shown by expressions such as “*nine houses away*” or “*nine years' travel*”. This resembles the literary idiom of Sumerians, where distance is not measured by units of space, but units of time: “*The eagle clutched me with iron claws, / And hovered me into space for four hours*”. Or, “*We went whither, twice twenty hours, / Until we discerned from afar a corner of the earth*”. The use of time for space and vice-versa is linked with that level of mental development of a human world, where the process of



“Muji and maids”
Illustrated by
Gazmend Leka

movement from the past to the present was perceived as unidimensional. Time and space were unified almost indistinctively into this dimension. These ancient mentalities constitute the primary artistic arguments for the debate on the origin of point and time of the Albanian epos. The cycle of Albanian heroes contains an intertwining of



The heroes and the maid from the "cycle of Albanian Epos"/ "Muji and maids" illustrated by Gazmend Leka

features from antique and Medieval European epics. We know, however, of a greater number of antique epics than those from the Medieval European period. There are a number of arguments in favour of a relative chronological determination of the source of epos in the period of transition from Illyrians to Albanians, from Illyrian to Albanian language, from the end of Romanticism to the confrontation with Slav invasions.

There is no ethnic and national identification of the community which has created the heroes. The "bravements" are divided in "theirs" and "other's". Their "bravements" are natives, the others are people who have a different language, rites and habitations. This is an earlier way of identifying the community. In epos the Albanian language is not mentioned. It is referred to as "their language". The others are usually identified through ethnonims. There is no real fatherland (Albania), only a poetic one. The legendary songs have a typical evangelic character and are Christian in essence. "The White Llatinc" reminds us of the antique Latin ethnonim.

The gracious Jevrenija and Jahudija remind us of the Jewish ethnonims (Slav "jevrej, Turk "jahudi"). "Jelini" (the Greek) and Beyzadeja (a hypercharacterisation, half Ottoman and half Persian) are identified in the same way. In epos there are also characters that remind us of the blurred notions of history such as the "black horns" (Priors, but according to some people, Komans as well, the bearers of Koman culture). The "uskoket" and hajduket" who can be identified with Slavic warriors, and who's songs are called "junacke pjesme" and "ajducke pjesme". It is worth mentioning that in Barleti's *"The History of Skanderbeg"*, the pairs are often shown as "ours" and "enemies", without mentioning specific ethnonims such as Arber, Epirote, or Albanian.

Because of the Arberesh's persistence in Italy, the warriors epos is replaced the cycle of the legendary songs dedicated to Gjergj Kastrioti, who sometimes has characteristics of Moses (who cut the rock to take out water for his own army like a prophet in the desert), sometimes with features of Saint George and sometimes with features of Christ, (the wailing for Skanderbeg is almost the same with that of Christ's crossing in evangelic literature).

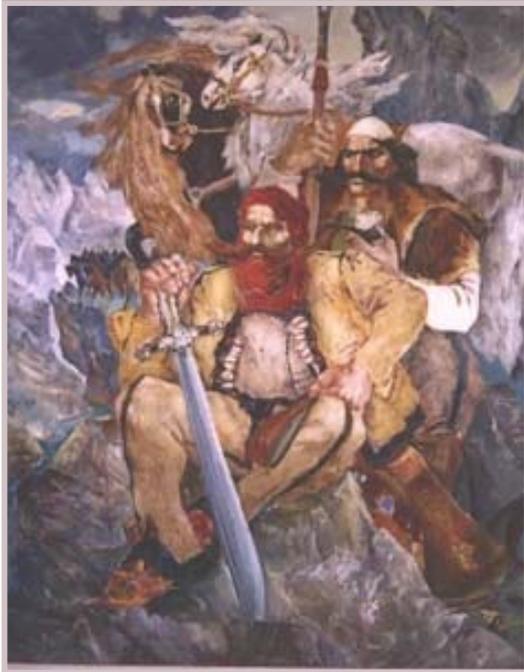
The basic conflict in the *Epos of Heros* and the cycle of Skanderbeg that marks the beginning of the historical epic is the anti-Ottoman conflict. There are also earlier conflicts with the Slavic settlers.

In Slav science, the northern cycle is considered as a recreation of the motifs of Serbo-Bosnian epos following a massive Islamisation of Albanians, some time in the 18th century and onwards. Some local scholars share the opinion that the Albanian epos is “of the Byzantine period” and its origin should be connected with the time of creation of “*Digenis Akritas*” among the Hellenes. By tying its origin with the birth of the Slav or Byzantine eposes, these views, either openly or implicitly, at times for certain purposes and at times owing to a lack of trusting the facts, put the formation of Albanian epos at a much later date.

The data concerning the overall cultural development of Albanians Epos indicate that the northern epos was created in a period of divergent development. This is the period of the largest territorial division of Albanian ethnos (into Gheg and Tosk) – in fact, no traces of the epos can be found south of Shkumbin River. This is the period of the separation of Southern polyphony from the North homophony. This is the period of rhotacism in the South and nasality in the North. And this is the period of the preservation of “a” in Gheg and its transformation into “ë” in Tosk. From the cultural viewpoint, epos was born when the most important two-branched changes in Albanian culture – Gheg and Tosk – occurred. This does not mean that epos is a folk tradition isolated in the North. There is much data stating that the northern cycle is not that northern as to be called self-segregated. Its fundamental motifs are found to have developed in the folklore of southern territories in the form of narratives, tales or legends.

From the historical perspective, epic poetry may not arise at any time and following any event. Albanian epos itself is totally prevailed by the conflict between its carriers and the population, which had moved to the Balkans - it bears the stamp of Slav invasions. Albanian epos rules out the idea of its creation from the first contacts with the newly-settling population, drawing the attention of the audience to the fact that other things had occurred before the time “*when there was an allegiance to the king*”. A more tendentious research could also explore data which bear witness of a danger from the sea and which could be connected with an echo from the time of the Roman conquest. These facts and reasoning enable one to develop the view that in epic poetry, irrespective of its multilayered character, there exists, however, a “*first time*”. It coincides with the 7th and 8th centuries A.D, when the most important divergent internal changes occurred in the ethnic culture, when qualitative cultural transformations occurred, such as the transition from Illyrian to Albanian, the consolidation of Gheg and Tosk koinés (instead of the narrow speech of tribes). This process of divergence was progressive because, by separating the northern cultural koiné from the southern one, it devel-

oped convergence within them, in the same way as the four dialects of Greek language had developed in antiquity. It was in this period that the local population was faced with Slav invasions in the Balkans. In addition, the data concerning the notion of a mythological space in the epos favour a connection of its origin with the period of these great transformations. If a researcher were to explore a prehistoric “*habitat*” of the world of epos characters and events, of a “*spiritual fatherland*”, of a “*patria poesis*”, this would be found in the cult of the land of forefathers, myth of native land, sanctification of highlands, deification of land, in the sense the Germans use this word when they say “*land*”. Though limited, certain data on the ethnically separate character of the people have been inherited in the Albanian spiritual world. These start with the distinction “*we-others*”, which is one of the earliest signs of community conscience. Most likely, the “*champion-enemy*” position is the same as the “*Hellenes-barbarians*” position among Hellenes. Although one might speak of the notion of land, the native land, *Albanian Ithaca*, as the notion of *Moré* is among the Arbëresh (in their historical songs), rather than of a well-defined space, yet the conscience of a fatherland which makes carriers of the epos feel “*at home*” among them, is at times evident. It is worth recalling that in ancient Hellenic epos, fatherland was used in two senses: Odysseus was son of Hellas, but he finds no peace unless he reaches “*the fatherland*”, Ithaca.



“Muji and Halil” by Ismail Lulani (1933-2002)

Evidence of the presence of ancient cultures in the Albanian Epos, especially of Greek-Roman culture, constitutes a testimony of its ancientness and its neighbourhood with these ancient civilizations. Lambertz argues that the northern epos comprises “*over 40 topics similar*” to Akritas’ songs. The choice of Muj (“*having both strength and power*”) is like the selection of Heraclitus. In a well-known Albanian song, little Omer must release “*father and uncle*” from prison, in the same way as Armourpulos (little Armour) in Akritas’ songs. Based on these analysis the Albanian epos, the “*northern cycle*”, in view of its artistic connection with the entire local folklore, is not that northern and limited as denoted by the term. Even historical geography does not matter much here.

Layering the epos on the basis of types of characters is especially important.

Belonging to the infancy of mankind, mythological characters need more attention and depth. The main heroes of the epos (Muj) represent the *cult of power*, just like Achilles in Homeric poems; whereas transition to the stage of *the cult of knowledge-craft* (the cult of

Odysseus) is not confirmed entirely. The focus of Albanian epos is the war hero, whereas the peace hero, “*second hero*” — Halil — is more inclined to the cult of beauty. In Hellenic epos, Odysseus had to subdue temptations of adventure and escape, far away from his country as he was, and as such he had to resolve situations with wisdom. In Albanian epos, Halil is living in his native country and has to win the hearts of “*girls*” through human gentleness.

Generally the Albanian epos is conditioned with the lute in the Albanians and with the gusle in the Slavs. It is identified that where the lute has gone out of date, the epos is artistically unraveled. It is turned from a ten syllable (imperial verse, or so called missionary verse) to an eight syllable verse which is very widespread in Albanian folklore. The lute is also called “an Albanian ethnic instrument” but it is proved that this is just a mystification because the lute emerged in Albanian space at the end of the first millennium from contact with the Islamic Arabic civilization. In the same way “*laudo*” entered Italian, “*lautari*” to Romanian, and “*lut*” into Spanish, which all had the common compound of the Arabic word “*al laudo*” (some have suggested it might have come from a wood’s name in the Middle East “*aloes*”).

A discovery from the American discographic collectionists Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who were also the basis of Ismail Kadare’s novel “*The File on H.*”, gathered and recorded bilingual legendary heroic Albanian and Slavic songs in the north of Albania and the former Yugoslavia. These are now kept in the Milman Parry collection at Harvard University. The epos have been partly transcribed to music by the remarkable Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, which has given the Albanian epos a considerable international value. A group of scholars are working to record the epos in the UNESCO program for “*Intangible Heritage*”.

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