

The Albanian and Slavic Eposes: Problems of Antiquity and Originality, Key and Debated Points

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Abstract

This study will focus its work in the legendary epic songs or otherwise originally known and called by many researchers as “Kreshnik Songs”- (English: Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors), a name used by both researchers and their collectors. Hence, this song corpus is considered the Albanian national epic. We have to research this part of the Albanian folklore, by considering it as one of the most important part of it, but also as one of the most problematic in the history of research, collecting and studying of our folklore, in general. Since this epos was collected relatively late, when the epics of other peoples had already been gathered in time and studied, it brought many doubts and new questions about its origins and originality. Considering the importance of this issue we wanted to make a re-interpretation of these problems, but also to add arguments in defense of the originality of the Albanian epic, which is our thesis.

Keywords: epic songs, originality, kreshnik, heroes, etc.

1. Introduction

The focus of this study will be the legendary epic songs otherwise, originally known and called by many researchers as “Kângë Kreshnikësh” (Eng.: Frontier Warrior Songs) a label used by both scholars and their collectors. Thus, this song corpus is considered to be the Albanian national epos.

We picked this part of the Albanian folklore, considering it as one of the most important one, but also as one of the most challenging one in the history or research, collecting and studying of folkore on the whole. These problems and challenges have also occurred due to the historical and political reasons which Albania went through in that time. The difficult conditions that Albania was going through at that time, and the fact that, in this period the country of Albania was not yet independent from the Ottoman Empire, have made its language and culture to develop slower than other countries of the Balkan Peninsula, which were disbaned earlier by the Turkish invasion and which countries established its own independency sooner. Consequently, this epos was collected relatively late, its first publications were made only in the year of 1924 in the journal of ‘Hylli i Dritës’ (Eng.: ‘The Star of Light’). Meanwhile, the eposes of other people had already been collected and studied on time, starting with the Grimm Brothers.

Therefore, since the Albanian epos has been collected a century later than the eposes of other people it brought many doubts and questions about its origin and originality. Considering this to be an important issue, we wanted to give an introduction of these problems, and we also wanted to add arguments for the purpose of protecting the originality of the Albanian epos, which is our thesis. In order to realize this objective we will consider and we will review some issues, namely issues that we consider to be the most important and the most delicate ones of this study.

2. Methods of Study

For the purpose of the realization of this study, mainly comparative methods will be used, through which the differences between the two eposes will be highlighted, which method will further create the possibility of the argumentation of the originality of the Albanian epos, as one of the key points of our study. This comparative method will concentrate in the important elements of the two epics, elements that are related to construction, structure, the time of the establishment, etc. In addition to the comparative method, textual, semiotic and structural methods will be used which will help us to argue for the essence of the differences between these two epics, be that in the construction part of the method or the thematic one, the linguistic or the semantic one.

By using these methods and through its method interweaves the analysis and the comparison of the epos texts and its ancillary literature will be more accurate, thus, the defending of our thesis for this study will be achieved easily.

3. The Time of the Collection of Songs and Doubts that Arose over Them

The time of the collection of the Albanian national epos caused the debates to arise. Why? This fact can be easily understood if we take into account the time of when the first epic songs came out in the press (Hylli i Dritës, 1924) with the long cycles of Kreshnik Songs.

Even earlier there were initiatives to collect songs from other Albanian and foreign scholars, however, the ones above were scientifically more accurate and fuller in terms of construction and understanding. In this particular case, we refer to the publications of Visaret e Kombit (Eng: The Hoards of the Nation), the second

volume where the songs that were considered the best were selected, collected and edited by the Reverend Bernardin Palaj and Reverend Donat Kurti, published in the years 1937 to 1939. Given that this epos was gathered so late, it was made doubtful to how true and original it was. This delay led to the idea that the epos could have been processed by its collectors or that it was translated from the Slavic epic. Thus, in light of its emergence, suspicions and prejudices began to increase, which questioned many of its aspects. In other words, in the emergence of the latter numerous debates arose, and discussion issues were raised, which in most cases were to its detriment. Some of those suspicions and prejudices can be read in this publication: Stavro Skëndi, *Poezia epike gojore e shqiptarëve dhe e sllavëve të jugut*, IDK, Tiranë 2007, page.165.

However, this according to us is, of course, an argument of a shallow logic, since the fact that it is collected late can not be taken as a fact to prove its lack of authenticity, or to say it is a copy of the epic of the Southern Slavs, especially when the reasons for the late collection of this work are already known.

Against these allegations lies the fact that the northern part of Albania, where it was the most widespread and developed epic, was throughout the history more independent and self-governing having its special canons, which in turn it has made the epic to be kept clean and to be transmitted from one generation to the next without any significant changes or essential influences.

"...the Albanian epos, which was alive as ever in the people, was still awaiting on its collectors and scholars" (Gjergj Zheji, *Folklori shqiptar*, SHBLU, Tiranë 2004, page.152.)

Other doubts that arose over its originality were also due to the similarities between these two eposes.

"Stavro Skendi has only noted two (!), German folk artist Shmaus seven, while D. Miçoviq their number lead at about 17 ..." (<http://www.njekomb.com/?p=8034>)

Nonetheless, as per our judgment these similarities are inherent due to the fact that these two nations are still neighbours with each other today. Also throughout history, there have been uninterrupted relationships, sometimes as enemies, sometimes conquering, sometimes being conquered, and sometimes as neighbors.

On the other hand, if we stop and see one by one the same similarities mentioned by the scholars, we will notice that most of them are mythical motives, in both songs and themes that exist, and not only in the culture of these two nations, but also in terms of the culture of other Balkan people too. Here we can mention for example, the legend of the deceased brother in Albanian known as "The Legend of Constantine and Doruntina" and the legend of masonry, otherwise known as "The Legend of Rozafa". "...the dead brother song is spread throughout the Balkan peoples. We find it at the Serbs (culture) with the title "Braca i sestra" (brothers and sisters, Vuk, II, no.9). While, "Another Albanian song belonging to the Balkan cycle is Rozafati."

(Stavro Skëndi, *Poezia epike gojore e shqiptarëve dhe e sllavëve të jugut*, IDK, Tiranë 2007, pages.74 – 75)

4. Other Controversial Aspects

Other similarities that have been dealt with and used as arguments against the originality of the Albanian epic were: the verse with which the songs were written; the Turkish language stratification in epos and the "Kreshnik" name by which were identified the heroes of this work. Each of them will be treated as a separate issue below.

4.1. The Verse which Kreshnik Songs Were Written With

One of the key points about which is debated and considered as a similarity between the eposes is the verse with which the songs were written. It is allegedly written in the Slavic verse that is otherwise called *desertac*. There were many of them, including Stavro Skëndi (Stavro Skëndi IDK, Tiranë 2007) who accepted such a thesis, that the ten-syllables came from the Serbian *desertac*.

But is this true? Where do the Albanian ten-syllables differ from the Slavic one?

First of all, it should be mentioned that the free, non-strict metric criterion is, in fact, not only a feature of Slavic or Albanian folklore, it is a medieval and a European phenomenon accepted by scholars and academics. (UK Research and Innovation, <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FH00839X%2F1>)

This opinion is also accepted by the most important scholars of the Albanian epic, who support the fact that the eposes of the Kreshniks is an autochthonous original Albanian verse, distinct from the Slavic one, with its clear and visible features.

Most of these scholars join in one point but also have their differences. Sejko says *it is a string without a rhyming range, and that Slavic meanwhile has a rhyming range*. As is known, rhyme is a late feature of literary creativity, both in the popular as well as in the cultivated one. (Veis Sejko, *Mosha e ciklit tonë të kreshnikëve*, "Bashkimi", dhjetor 14, 1980)

While Zheji, along with Sinan, go deeper into the problem by arguing more widely that Albanian ten-syllable is not only a string without rhyming, and the Slavic one is its rival, but it is also irregular, in spite of the Slavic one that is regular. Thoughts of Zheji over which S. Skëndi and M. Lambertz agree upon. (Maximilian Lambertz, *Disa të dhëna në lidhje me ciklin e Mujit e të Halilit*, Botim i Institutit të Shkencave, Tiranë, 1955, Nr.2, pages. 63 – 70: Stavro Skëndi, "Albanian an South Slavic Oral Poetry" *Fild*. 1945, page. 20)

In addition to this fact, Zheji adds that the Albanian epic has a tonic prose and the opposite of a newer prozodie, such as that of Silambic that has as a Slavic epic feature. (Gjergj Zheji, *Folklori shqiptar*, SHBLU, Tiranë 2004, page.177)

Sinan on the other hand, adds to the fact that the Albanian epos has a heterometric range and has an inner metric order which no Slavic epos has and this sequence is not strict in the verse according to Sinan, but more in singing. (Shaban Sinani, *Mitologji në eposin e kreshnikëve*, Argeta-LMG, Tiranë 2006, page. 24)

To reinforce this attitude of scholars, we bring a part of the epos itself. The verses to which the irregular epos verse is to be noted and a combination of the ten-syllable, with 8 verses, 9 and 11 syllable-verses.

"Po thotë dielli: â ndorja e ême! / Kâ thânë hâna : â ndorja ême!" (Visaret e Kombit, (Eng.: "The sun says: it is in my faith! / The moon said: it is in my faith)

Kangë Kreshnikësh dhe Legjenda, III, Botimet Françeskane, Shkodër 2007, page. 29)

"Lamtumirë o shokë e kjoshti" / "Vllâ nuk âsht shiu tue t'ra / Kurrku rê n'qiell nuk âsht"

(Eng.: "Goodbay my friends and neighbour" / "Brother rain is falling no more" / "There is not a single cloud in the sky")

(Visaret e Kombit, Kangë Kreshnikësh dhe Legjenda, III, Botimet Françeskane, Shkodër 2007, page. 95 – 120)

As already understood by the order of all of these viewpoints, and by the concretization with verses from the Albanian epic, the verse of the latter is completely different from that of the Slavic one. We conclude that there could have been no copying from either side and there can be no doubt about the authenticity of this verse and of this work.

4.2. Names of Kreshnik Heroes and the Muslim Classes

The names of the heroes: perhaps a little of a complicated matter as the name and language are the ones that are kept, but they are also changed and alienated over time, making it difficult to achieve the discovery of the essence and meaning of its origins.

Some scholars focused their study in the Turkish like names of the epic characters as here they wanted to prove the age of this work. The Turkish influence in the Albanian language exists, as it is well known, thanks to the 500 years of ruling in our lands by the Ottoman Empire. (Lindita Latifi, *Mbi huazimet turke në gjuhën shqipe, krahasuar me gjuhët e tjera të Ballkanit*, Dudaj, Tiranë 2006)

Every epoch leaves its traces not only on works such as the eposes, but also in life, culture and many other areas, as this is more than proven by *Latin, Italian, Slavic and Turkish borrowings found in the Albanian language lexicon*. (Jani Thomai, *Leksikologjia e shqipes*, Botimet Dudaj, Tiranë 2005, pages 215 – 220)

Albanian scholars acknowledge that the different times have influenced the epos and left their marks. Jorgo Panajoti states that *"...every historical period has given the eposes a certain historical-social and poetic subject, it has left its seal on it, thus epos, as it came from when we began to recognize it, resembles alpine snow where the layer occupies the layer, or an old painting on which the new layers are laid on."* (Jorgo Panajoti, *Eposi shqiptar i kreshnikëve*, "Perla" 4(12), 1998, page.66.)

Even Gjergj Zheji in his study argues that the Epic of the Kreshniks has undergone transformations over time, *which has also led to the Muslimization of a name.*

(Gjergj Zheji, *Folklori shqiptar*, Ribot.SHBLU, Tiranë 2004, page.171). This fact is evident if we look at the names of the characters as; Ymer Aga, Zuku Bajraktar, Ali Bajraktari etc.

These are some of the names, which clearly show the Turkish influence, as bajraktar words and aga are of Turkish origin. Epos existed even before the Turkish invasion, but with the arrival of the Turks, being an oral creation, it did not escape the influence of the Turks. Hence, thanks to that influence on epos we will find other words as well, such as: mejdan, bejleg, dert, hall, kulla, çoban, etc; or in ways of greetings such as, Hoshgjeta, Hoshbulldami, Byrum, etc.

Greetings in Albanian mixed with Turkish words:

"Ti hoshgjeta, ti i kâ thânë" / "A jê ksajt ? _Plakut i ka thânë"

(Eng.: "You Welcome, he said" / " Are you here? The old man said")

(Visaret e Kombit, page.83)

Nevertheless, in our opinion, with the presence of such a quantity of Turkish lexicon in this work, it can not be questioned, neither its originality nor its seniority. This for a few reason:

1. The main heroes of the work do not have Turkish names, but they are Albanian. The name Muja, is explained by the verb of the dialect gegë "me mujtë" (Eng: "if it could"). Whereas, the name of the other hero, Halil, is explained by the words, handsome, graceful and a neat warrior.

2. The second reason is that the heroes of this work are the enemies of the kings of the sea and not the viziers of pashallari? The latter are not mentioned in any string of any of the songs.

3. The third reason: the songs of the Kreshniks *"clearly appear on an old pagan and even pre-Christian belief, which neither Christianity nor Muslimism could have touched on its essence."* (Gjergj Zheji, *Folklori shqiptar*,

SHBLU, Tiranë 2004, page.170)

4. The fourth reason: epos is characterized by an old, *almost medieval* Albanian mentality

(Qemail Haxhihasani, *Epika popullore si shprehje e veçorive të etnosit tonë në mesjetë*, "Kultura Popullore", 1982, Nr.2, pages. 35 – 42)

5. The fifth: In the everyday life of these characters, *the customs of the Albanian honor, hospitality, and the Albanian besa (pledge of honor)* and supremacy come to the fore, which express very well the originality and the connection with the Albanian culture.. (Anton Çeta, *Nderi si veçori etnopsikologjike e popullit tonë si veçori në këngët e kreshnikëve*, në ÇFSH 3, 1983, page.199)

6. The sixth: in epos we find traces of ancient epics where there is analogy within them, analogies that can be seen in the way of structural organization. Also in the presence of gods who intervene in the event in favor of one or the other party. So in the epos we have Faeries and Mountain Hours. Whereas, in the Greek epos, for example, we have Zeus with other gods that depend on his power.

So, the harsh songs, regardless of the influences and the presence of Turkish stratification remain authentic, and it can not be questioned neither the antiquity nor the originality of it.

4.3. The Name Kreshnik and Hypothesis About its Background

The name of the heroes of the Albanian epic was a special name and often incomprehensible, so for the explanation and its origin some hypotheses have been made. Among them are:

1. The first hypothesis states that the name Kreshnik comes from the word of staroslavski (the old Slavic): "krst" from which is formed "krstnik", with the crusading meaning, knight of Christianity.

2. The second hypothesis connects it to a Slavic word as well, this time with the word Slavic end, meaning of, the border, border. In fact, the acrylic songs are explained as border guard, edge, side guard. Ideas which are also defended by researchers such as, Arshi Pipa, Ernest Koliqi and Jorgo Panajoti.

3. Another hypothesis is one that explains this name with an old "krajshnik" form. This is formed by the toponym Krajina, which means inhabitant of Krajina, its warrior.

4. The other hypothesis gives another explanation, according to us a much more convincing one. This hypothesis explains this word by linking it to an Illyrian-Trake word, "krep" = "flash" = "karp" = "rock", which are of a meaningful voice. Old Albanian words roughly link the word kreshnik to the meaning of the man of the cliffs, a mountain man.

5. A non-refusing explanation is also the one that approaches the local word "kreshtë" (Eng.: "crest") of a connected herd of hair, as a sign of bravery, but also of the ridge of the mountain, as its upper and the most severe part. So it comes from the mountain, the height, the mountain crest, thus, mountain lover.

6. It is possible to include the alternative interpretive word "krye" (Eng.: "top") in the dialect form, as the scholar Sh.Sinani says, as it pronounces the end, which is used, Krej - Lura = Lura Top. (Sh.Sinani, *Mitologji në eposin e kreshnikëve*, Argeta-LMG, Tiranë 2006, page. 84)

In our view, the most credible are hypotheses 4 and 5, which explain the name Kreshnik, by the word Illyro-Trake and with the world the Albanian crest, because they give a clearer meaning. However, this issue has not yet been fully verified or endorsed, and we believe it belongs to the science of etymology to deal more precisely with it.

5. Conclusions

After the research and the analysis that we have done of the above mentioned topics in our paper, we conclude that the Albanian Epic Songs are original creations of the Albanian culture. These songs are not a copy or imitation of the Slavic Epic Songs, although we mentioned many similarities during our analysis. We also conclude that the Albanian Epic Songs are written in ten syllable -verses, with no rhyme, with heterometric verses - in this aspect it is very different from the Slavic Epic Songs.

We can also mention that the Turkish elements do not vanish its beauty, because these elements do not touch the core of the themes, the structure and the language, as these are only few linguistic Turkish elements. Also, the doubts of the naming of the main characters do not touch its originality. This is because the naming "kreshnik" (brave man) is discussed and interpreted and still remains an opened question. Anyway, although there are many hypotheses, most of the interpretations on the word "kreshnik" are based mostly in four root words that come from Illyrian and Albanian. We conclude that the Albanian Epic Songs, as most of the Epic works as a genre, are based on the antique models, but this does not come from imitation or copying, but because of the similarities that exist within the genre of the epic. And naturally this brings us to the idea that although the Albanian Epic Songs have been doubted many times, they still remain from the time they are collected up to nowadays, an original and special creation.

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