

Ethnic element in Albanian Valiant epic songs according to Demush Shala



Ethnoculture

Keywords: Valiant epic songs, ethnic element, Valiant's, epic, Albanian, Canon of Lekë Dukagjin, traditional, etc..

Vlorë Fetaj - Berisha

Institute of Albanology in Prishtina, Republic of Kosova.

Abstract

Often perceived as a national treasure, Albanian valiant songs have raised the curiosity of foreign and at the same time Albanian researchers, which often has led to deep and important scientific studies to the subject. In this context, important contribution has been given also by Prof. Demush Shala; researcher, classifier, publisher and collector of Albanian folklore. Here we shall present some of the arguments brought forward by D. Shala²³², as to prove the authenticity and the presence of Albanian Ethnicity within the Albanian Valiant epic songs.

In addition to other research studies needed in regard to the Albanian Valiant epic songs, the ethnical element undoubtedly presents also a very important research subject. Throughout the evolution and strata developments of this category of songs, many traits are “*attributed to the national specifics*”²³³. Albeit not many of them, other researchers have also emphasized the presence of the authenticity within this ethnical category. In this order, Qemal Haxhihasani says (unassertively enough according to Shala) „*Here we find expression and reflection of the patriarchal family reports, the authority of older to the younger brother, husband to wife, brother to sister; heroic conception of life, honor and faith; honoring the guest, the revenge, the evaluation of the opponent, respect for tradition*”²³⁴.

According to the logic and the type of ranking brought forward by Q. Haxhihasani, we can understand the existence of highly respected family hierarchy as part of tradition, prominent also in the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini. Based on the comparison brought forward through examination of at least 500 different songs and variants, simultaneously considering also the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini, the conclusion is that; *regarding most often cases and from frequent contact points, Albanian valiant songs, on top of artistic-idea diverse content, also adopted in itself the rich colors in the wide frame of the peoples life, where we can discern human development through the centuries, good and bad fortunes that escorted them, victories and defeats in various struggles against compelling opponents*²³⁵.

Despite the fact that Canon deals with broader perspective of family circle which is better organized (fulfilling the tasks and obligations for each member of the family), in the epos, we can hardly count a small number of family members. According to Shala, this is complexity in itself, not to exclude fairytale elements as to prove the ancient roots of this category of epic.

²³² Demush Shala was born on 30th April 1929 in Nakëll village, municipality of Peja in today's Kosovo, where he also finished primary school; the secondary school in Gjakova and Peja municipalities; the University of Philosophy and Literature in Belgrade in 1956. His working career started as a high school teacher in High School – Gymnasium of Pristina, than as a; professor of Albanian language in Lower Secondary School in Kaçanik; professor and director of the Pedagogical High School in Prizren. He was also the chief editor for the school textbook publishing's in Socialist Republic of Serbia – Pristina department; secretary of the Chamber of Education and Culture of SAP Kosovo; professor of Folk Literature and Theory of Literature at the High Pedagogical School of Pristina. Result of the sickness he retired in 1986. His research work consists of three anthologies consisting folkloric material: “Historical Folk Song” in 1973, “Legendary Folk Song” in 1972 and “Popular Lyric Songs” in 1972. He is also the author of three research monographs: “On Our Historical Folk Epic” in 1982; “About Valiant Albanian Songs” in 1985 and “Folk Anecdote” in 1981. Shala was also the author of many reviews, polemics and other studies related to Albanian folklore.

²³³ Demush Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike shqiptare, Rilindja Prishtinë, 1985, f. 90. (About Albanian Valiant Songs, Rilindja, Pristina, 1985, p. 90.)

²³⁴ Qemal Haxhihasani, , *Disa çështje rreth studimit të kangës popullore tregimtare të trevës veriperëndimore të Ballkanit*, Studime filologjike të USHT, IHGJ, Tiranë, 1967, nr. 3, f. 67.

(some issues about the study of popular narrative folk songs in northwestern Balkan Region, philological studies USHT, IHGJ, Tirana, 1967, no. 3, p. 67.)

²³⁵ D.Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike..., vep. e cit. f. 91. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 191.)

In the song often contexts, beside the older brother who carries the authority in the family, it is also the mother who enjoys intact power privileges, which again, it is not something that we can find in the Canon, in which respect; we are to understand the ancient part, which leads us towards the prehistorical period of matriarchy, known to have proceeded the subsequent age of patriarchy, during which era, the position of women and the mother it is known to have weakened. This gives us the understanding that the position of the women in the Albanian Valiant songs is much more prominent in regard to the women's role portrayed in the Canon. The argument becomes even stronger when mothers and brothers ask the daughters or sisters about the husband before the marriage decision has been taken, thus as we can find from the epic songs that final consent belongs to women herself, as it is the case with Ajkuna, the sister of Muja and Halil (verses 43-48)²³⁶.

In time, as a result of much later social layers or new historical circumstances, new elements can be found which have been added to epic songs, brought forward mostly by cultural element of the Ottoman rule, which again, it is perceived as a period to have seen women role within the family and society diminishing even further, or lower social standing for the women as the result of the new cultural elements influenced mostly by the religion. We can find elements of this in the song: *Lule Frangu* (verses 179-181)²³⁷.

By further analyzing Valiant epic songs and Albanian cultural practices, Shala tries to target elements regarded as similar, likewise different (such as: singing and dancing, godfather, chieftains, relations etc) in the wider context analyzing both parties. For example, he goes by comparing Valiant wedding traditional practices with those found present within Albanian wedding culture. In this respect, it is understood that Valiant's do not undertake engagement arranged by the middlemen (the task they prefer to undertake themselves). In the cases when there is an engagement dispute, or when there is more than one Valiant who want to take the same bride, it is the maiden who has to choose whom she wants to marry, the unanimous decision which is accepted by all parties. The maiden can make her decision symbolically, as it is the case with the daughter of Beg Ali Beg, when she decided to chose (instead of the son of Osman Aga Dizdar) the son of Siran Tina Alia by „*putting the apple in his lap*”, which symbolized that she shall marry him. This type of gesture it is a widespread folk symbol of eroticism, known also as a very old Albanian ethnic phenomenon²³⁸. Similar Ethnic elements also include: putting the coins (or bear nails) in the service tray when offering the congratulations for the bride, known to be associated with generosity, as friend who is offering the goods to his host friend, known also to be a widespread Albanian tradition.

Regarding Valiant marriage elements that are also related to the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini, we can point out the exogamic belief, or belief that marriages should happen outside the tribe, meaning that endogamy or marriage within the tribe were (still are) strictly prohibited. In this regard, analyzing Valiant Albanian Epos cycle, to begin with, it is understood to have been only one tribe, with other tribes coming in latter stages through different names, as in this way they could engage intermarriages. This is only to prove the age depth of the Valliant's, which probably can be related to the embryo of one nation²³⁹.

In much latter stages, probably as the result of subsequent stratifications conditioned by historical and social circumstances, first we begin to discern identity, than also national consciousness, as we can tell from the epic song verses ”*white Fatima faces Urosh in the due*”²⁴⁰. This song also tells us about the hospitality treats, as one of the more generous features of then people. As a national ethnic category, hospitality and friendship within

²³⁶ Vojislav S. Daçetoviq, *Kangë popullore shqiptare të Kosovë-Metohisë, Legjenda dhe kangë kreshnike, bleni i I, Mustafa Bakija, Prishtinë, 1952, f. 67.* (Albanian Folklore Songs of Kosovo and Metohija, Valiant Legend and Songs I, Mustafa Bakija, Pristina, 1952, p. 67.)

²³⁷ Instituti i Folklorit, *Folklor shqiptar II, Epika legjendare, vëllimi I parë, 1966, Tiranë, f. 337.*

(Folklore Institute, *Albanian Folklore II, Legendary Epic, First Volume, 1966, Tirana, p. 337.*)

²³⁸ D. Shala, *Rreth këngëve kreshnike, vep. e cit. f. 95.*(About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 95.)

²³⁹ D. Shala, *Rreth këngëve kreshnike, vep. e cit. f. 98.*(About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 98.)

²⁴⁰ IAP, *KK I, vep.e cit., f. 334.*(IAP, *KK I, book. cited p. 334.*)

heroic epic it is known as a prominent feature. It is important to mention that during his earlier studies, D. Shala decides to name ethnic singers and performers as “ethnic genius”, term often used by other researchers, but in the contest of this study he used the term “minstrel”, attributing to them all the crime merits regarding the strata and other elements they have entered into these creations²⁴¹.

Beside the friend of the house and hospitality, another important element is loyalty, better understood through the so called “*Besa*”, which according to Shala; it portrays institution of strong spiritual morality implemented through build relations between the Valliant’s within and outside the tribe, regarded also as the choice in relation to the most important life issues. As a virtual institution, *Besa* was recognized and respected also by the others, referring or adhering to it whenever promising or agreeing about something with Valiant’s, who on the other side, always held loyal to the covenant. This also is represented within the song “*Ali Bajraktari – Besa*”²⁴².

Intervention or meditation was also perceived within the status of *Besa* by the Valiant’s, considered as a virtue and characterizing manliness, which we can also find in the song “*Muja and Halili in the duel*”²⁴³. When someone is a fugitive and he seeks protection from someone by referring to *Besa*, Valliant are bound to protect him at any cost regardless his deeds or who he is. This also represents the way *Gjeto Basho Muja* acts in relation with one *Rad of the King*, who previously murdered his seven sons, occurrence portrayed within the song “*Basho Jona*”²⁴⁴.

Being associated with the natural imaginary beings, Valliant’s also had their connections with the so known fairies, as it is the case when fairies were under protection of *Muja*, if we are to refer to the song “*Muja’s Fairies*”²⁴⁵. Considering this kind of connection with the nature, above and beyond the power of the poetry, we can also discern present mythical and fairytale elements.

Another ethical category intertwined between human pride and spiritual worship, unquestionable within all walks of life is represented through so called mans honor²⁴⁶, or better understood by the term “*Erzi*” according to Shala. How precious male honor is, we can find within the epic story of the song “*Simanic Serdari kidnaps Muja’s wife*”²⁴⁷.

Killing the enemy in his sleep, is considered next as one of the most unmanly and cowardly actions by the Vallians, the event which appears again throughout the song “*Basho Jona*”²⁴⁸. Desecration of corpses and graves of opponents is also a move that Villains shall not do, considering it as a cowardly and low act. This type of occurrence we can find in the song “*Halil takes revenge for Muja*”²⁴⁹.

The inheritance feeling, awareness of ethnicity and virtues cultivated generation after generation in Valiant epic songs have often been raised to the level of the cult. According to Shala, they are in the continuous effort to hold to the values inherited from the ancestors, equally as they put it; „as not to dishonor the graves they lay on”. The epic song known as “*Halil takes White Tankosa*”²⁵⁰ tells us about these Valiant attributes.

Another unnatural form of kinship related to the Valiant’s regarding the inside, likewise outside life-circles, it is the so called ‘*vëllamia*’ (special kind of sworn brotherhood), which, according to Çabej „it falls within the old

²⁴¹ D. Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike, vep. e cit. f. 101-102. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 101-102.)

²⁴² IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 51.(IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 51.)

²⁴³ IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 194.(IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 194.)

²⁴⁴ IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 175.(IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 175.)

²⁴⁵ Po aty, f. 203.(ibid. p. 203.)

²⁴⁶ D. Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike, vep. e cit. f. 109. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 109.)

²⁴⁷ IF, FSH II, vep e cit. f. 432.(IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 432.)

²⁴⁸ Po aty, f. 175. (ibid. p. 175.)

²⁴⁹ Instituti Albanologjik I Prishtinës, Këngë Kreshnike, I, Prishtinë 1974, f. 203.(Albanological Institute in Pristina, Valiant Songs I, Pristina, 1974, p. 203.)

²⁵⁰ IAP, KK I, vep. cit. f.222. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 222.)

*habits inherited from the ancient times, a common occurrence or phenomenon which could be traced also today within the Balkan region*²⁵¹. Epic songs can tell us that ‘*vëllamia*’ manifested itself amongst all social strata, including opposite sexes or between man and a women, as in the song; “*Halil’s Wedding*”²⁵². *Vëllamia – Motërzmia* (the brother-sister sworn pact) also takes place between the Valiant’s and the so called mountain fairies, which shows mythological elements of kinship connections, as in the song *The Power of Muja*²⁵³. Regarding ‘*vëllamia*’, Shala concludes that it was especially common in times of need or difficulties, usually for the purpose of helping each-other when facing the natural un-known, not to exclude the settling of the everyday social issues such as a morality²⁵⁴.

As in regard to the “Canon of Lekë Dukagjini”, pastures represent only the next amongst many other issues where we can draw a parallel in regard to the Valiant cycle, this especially being aware of the fact that biggest wars were fought to protect those so-called pasture-lands. One of the songs where we can draw on this knowledge is “*Muja slaughters black Arab*”²⁵⁵. Similar comparison in regard to the Valiant Songs and the ‘Canon of Lekë Dukagjini’ according to Shala, is sharing the spoils equally between the warriors, likewise bearing the credits for the victories. This has been illustrated within the song ‘*Muja releases friends from the prison*’²⁵⁶.

According to the same tradition, another widespread practice that can be found amongst Valiant’s is the blood-feud, which as a general rule, shall always be carried in the manly manner. Killing opponent while they are sleeping is considered one such a dishonorable action to be avoided. Revenge is found to be a main motive in many epic songs, such as “*Halil revenges Muja’s blood, Muja revenges Halil’s blood*”²⁵⁷. Blood forgiveness or reconciliation can often be found present in the epics, usually preferable option than revenge itself, or blood payment as they call it. Similar feature treated by Shala is the hostage taking, a preferred method of human development since ancient times when it comes to the settling and regulating social and interpersonal relationships. Similar phenomenon can also be found in the song “*The daughter of Herni Mustafë Aga faces Seja of King in the battlefield*”²⁵⁸.

Another action that plays a role in regulating social relations within the tribe is taking the oath with the aim of self purification, or obliging the other both morally and spiritually. Swearing is in the sun, the moon, earth and heavens, bread and salt, are expressions reflecting archaic age of this oral genre according to Shala. The oath was also on family members, such as „*Don’t talk nonsense, friend, for the head of your mother!*”²⁵⁹, as within the epic song of “*Fleeing of Hajkuna*”²⁶⁰. The Valiant’s also took collective (or together as a group) oaths, as demonstrated in the epic song “*Dedë Kahrmani attempts to disunite Muja and Halil*”²⁶¹. The most common traditional heroic oath is pledging to the edge of the sword, as an alternative form of regulating vital, kinship and neighboring relationships between the Valiant’s, in regard to the social and historical circumstances, as again to address important life issues²⁶².

Interesting element also to be mentioned or characteristic that makes bridge connection between the local contemporary traditions and to that what we know about Valiant’s, is godparent or taking the hair from the new

²⁵¹ Eqrem Çabej, Studime gjuhësore, V, Rilindja, Prishtinë, 1975, f. 342. (Eqrem Çabej, Language Studies V, Rilindja, Pristina, 1975, p. 342.)

²⁵² IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 71. (IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 71.)

²⁵³ Po aty, f. 104. (ibid. p. 104.)

²⁵⁴ D. Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike ..., vep. e cit. f. 112. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 112.)

²⁵⁵ IF, FSH II, Vep. e cit. f. 379. (IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 379.)

²⁵⁶ IAP, KK I, vep. cit. f. 275. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 275.)

²⁵⁷ IF, IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 31. (FSH II, book. cited p. 31.)

²⁵⁸ IAP, KK I, vep. cit. f. 328. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 328.)

²⁵⁹ Po aty, f. 101. (ibid. p. 101.)

²⁶⁰ IAP, KK I, vep. e cit. f. 99. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 99.)

²⁶¹ Po aty, f. 132. (ibid. p. 132.)

²⁶² D. Shala, Rreth këngëve kreshnike..., vep. e cit. f. 117. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 117.)

born, best portrayed within the song “*Muja’s Horse*”²⁶³. In the case of the Valiant’s, the godparent presence was also recognized during the other festive occasions such as coronations or marriages.

Searching for various solutions and taking the advices through council of elders or wise old people, it is a cultivated form or a tradition that also fits with the “Canon of Lekë Dukagjini”. The often experience with invading great imperial powers from east and west, was not an obstacle for the broad mass of people to hold to the ancient principles of domestic judiciary rules²⁶⁴. On the regular bases, assemblies were organized as to discuss important issues and help to create the opinions from the parties, also to reach judgments about the problems or to reach the solutions for particular issues. Sticking to the rule, the so called ‘mans chambers’ (*odat e burrave*), were recognized and respected institutions (to this date within some Albanian highland communities), with rules and codes often strictly applied, simultaneously also fulfilling the role of educational institutions for the younger generations²⁶⁵. About these assemblies we can also learn from the epic song “*Halil revenges Muja’s blood*”.

Important fact to be mentioned is also the so called ‘disownment’ (*Lëçitja*), which is known to represents another ethnic element that reflects the social relationship reports. It represent a phenomenon that reflects expression of fear rather than to be manifested in practical terms, this simply because its choice was considered complex and to heavy burden (heavier than death itself) by the Valliant’s. Reflection within this phenomenon can be found in the epic song “*Muja releases friend from prison*”²⁶⁶.

As to the rules in regard to the ‘messenger’, he is to be received and protected by the Valiant’s (the rule also found to be applied as sacred according to the “Canon of Lekë Dukagjini”). In this order, the messenger shall not be distracted when performing his duties, furthermore, he is to be looked after, in cases (especially when bringing a good news) also rewarded. These characteristics are portrayed also within the song “*Halil abducts Mirusha of Gredina*”²⁶⁷.

The ‘testimony’ represent next Albanian ethnic category, which also can be related to the covenant or “*Besa*” (see above) according to its principle and respect. This applying rules are best described within different epic songs, such as “*Halil after death*”²⁶⁸, “*Ajkuna mourns Omer*”²⁶⁹ and “*Ali Bajraktari marriage*”²⁷⁰.

Important place in relation to the Albanian Valiant’s epic, is taken by the so called ‘crying tradition’, this in regard to man and the women regardless of their age. The characteristic to be mentioned is the lamentation done by man for a deceased male, not applicable for women. Such lamentation appears in the context of the song “*Muja tests his friends*”²⁷¹.

To conclude his study, Shala comes forward by claiming that the ethnic elements occupy very important place within traditional Albanian costumes. Furthermore, he also disagrees with the statement of another fellow researcher known as a Đenana Buturović, who presumes that (during her research studies on the Bosnian and Herzegovinian heroic Muslim epos); creators, narrators and executors of traditional songs did not aim to reflect on the traditional costumes, but they sought immortalization of important events and faces or personalities,

²⁶³ IF, FSH II, vep. e cit. f. 271. (IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 271.)

²⁶⁴ D. Shala, , Rreth këngëve kreshnike, vep. e cit. f. 119. (About the Valiant Songs... book. cited p. 119.)

²⁶⁵ IF, FSH II, vep.e cit. f. 203. (IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 203.)

²⁶⁶ IAP, KK I, vep. e cit. f. 275. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 275.)

²⁶⁷ Po aty, f. 202.(ibid. p. 202.)

²⁶⁸ IF, FSH II, vep.e cit. f. 257. (IF, FSH II, book. cited p. 257.)

²⁶⁹ Po aty, f. 247.(ibid. p. 247.)

²⁷⁰ Po aty, f. 150.(ibid. p. 150.)

²⁷¹ IAP, KK I, vep. e cit. f. 173. (IAP, KK I, book. cited p. 173.)

meaning that the actual costumes and ceremonies are not presented in their fullest form²⁷². In this context, Shala says that this does not apply in regard to the Albanian Valiant epic songs, in contrary, the habits, costumes and other ethnic features are found to be intertwined with the actual events and brave personalities, seen as real and reachable in their actions, also incorporated within the spirit of national traditions. Just how accurate and fitting all this is, we can also find within the following statement: "... *always has remained faithfully preserved and powerfully expressed in strong colors all that ethnographic and inheritance found, which reflects the life on the highlands, social order within the tribes, features and costumes, patriarchal family ethics in regard to home or village domestic relationships within or outside the tribes. This legacy is considered to consist a good part of originality and the value of these epic songs*"²⁷³. According to all this, better part agrees with his understanding, so we can appreciate Shala's elaborating efforts to reflect on the elements that characterize Valliant epic songs, as to prove their Albanian origin.

References

1. SHALA, Demush, About Albanian Valiant songs, Editorial publications, "Rilindja", Pristina, 1985.
2. SHALA, Demush, Ours Historical Folk Epic, Rilindja, Pristina, 1982.
3. SHALA, Demush, National Literature, Office for textbooks and teaching resources of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo, Rilindja, Pristina, 1988.
4. Albanological Institute, Valiant Songs I, Pristina 1974.
5. ÇABEJ, Eqrem, Language Studies V, Rilindja, Pristina, 1975.
6. Çetta, Anton, BERISHA, Rrustem and BERISHA, Anton, *Some information about our our songs*, "Jeta e Re" 1/1976.
7. Institute of Folklore, Albanian Folklore II, Legendary Epic, The First Volume, 1966, Tirana.
8. DANÇETOVIQ, Vojislav S., Albanian Folklore Songs of Kosovo and Metohija, Valiant Legend and Songs I, Mustafa Bakija, Pristina, 1952.
9. HAXHIHASANI, Qemal, *Some issues about the study of popular narrative songs in northwestern Balkans*, Philological Studies of USHT, IHGJ, nr. 3, Tirana, 1967.
10. BUTUROVIĆ, Đenana, Family Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovinian Muslim Epic Folklore Songs, The Voice of Country's Museum in Sarajevo – Ethnology, B. XVIII, Sarajevo, 1963.

²⁷² Đenana Buturović, Porodični odnosi u epshim narodnik pjesmama Muslimana u Bosni i Hercegovini, Glasnik Zemaljskog Muzeja u Sarajevu-Etnologija, sv. XVIII, Sarajevo 1963, f. 41. (Đenana Buturović, Family Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovinian Muslim Epic Folklore Songs, The Voice of Country's Museum in Sarajevo – Ethnology, B. XVIII, Sarajevo, 1963. p.41.

²⁷³ Anton Çetta, Rrustem Berisha and Anton Berisha, , *Disa të dhëna rreth këngëve tona kreshnike*, "Jeta e re" , 1/1976, f. 166. (*some information about our songs*, "New Life" 1/1976.)