

The ballad of the walled up woman in Albanian studies

Olimbi VELAJ*

Abstract

In the Albanian folklore, the ballad of the walled up woman is one of the oldest and best known ballads. Its motive is to sacrifice a young woman in the foundations of a castle, a bridge, or another object that is important for ethnicity. The spread of this motive crosses the Balkan borders.

Albanian neighbors, because of the most favorable circumstances like historical, geopolitical and other, have collected and published their songs half a century ago, and with them the options of the ballad for the walled up woman. Collections and Albanian version publications have been always at a disadvantage because of being fewer and not exhibited in a good way in the European literature of that time. In studies conducted in recent decades by philologists and Albanian scholars of folklore this ballad is estimated especially for the variants about the fortress of Shkodra.

In this review the aim is to note how this ballad has been studied since the time of its collection until today, how has documentation evolved and what progress was made in collection of variants and in their interpretation. We refer also to researchers and schools which influenced me more.

Keywords: ballad, immurement, variants, studies, folklore, Albanian, castle, Balkan, interpretation, scholars, literature

One of the most interesting motives and more prevalent in the Balkans is the immurement of a human being on the foundations of an important work for the community.

A legend, a ballad and sacrifices of people who want to have stable buildings, that came to us documented or transmitted from generation to generation, remain even today a matter of interest to those dealing

* Ma. Olimbi Velaj, Fakulteti i Edukimit, Universiteti "Aleksander Moisiu" Durrës, olimbivelaj@yahoo.com

with popular culture. Also, this motive has been influential in the literature as well.

Thus, this "concern" from curiosity to know more about this issue becomes an attempt to present facts and arguments that illuminate it.

Since the very beginning, is important to clarify that the ballad stimulated great interest to go to other sources, not just artistic, but the roots of sacrifice: the myth, to ritual, the ritual and to the habit, which even today is kept alive in the Balkans in its softened form, replaced by a human sacrifice, the sacrifice of an animal.

Being closely related to that tragic moment of immurement of a human being in exchange for the sustainability of an important facility for people of a district and a particular ethnicity, this ballad has attracted researchers from many fields. Therefore, it is not by chance that it might attract scholars in folklore studies, as in those of ethnologists, mythologist, anthropologists, and archaeologists in studies of other areas.

Interest in folklore

About two centuries ago, interest in national epics was admitted nearly as categorical imperative among cultural elites of the countries of Europe. Time of creation of national states, putting emphasis on language and culture of each nation, made the European Romanticism an engine of promotion for the epos and sagas. The thirst to "invent" saga, even when they did not exist was in fact a resultant that brought to surface many old dormant legends among European peoples. The efforts to publish the national epic saga had their results even in Albania.

Enthusiasm that prompted James Macpherson (1736-1796) with his "discovery" of fragments of ancient poetry collected in the highlands of Scotland pushed the writers and scholars on the race between them, in a race that lasted nearly a century. Artificiality of the alleged translation of the epic poems of the Celtic Knights and legendary bard, Ossian, probably was not an honorable act in itself. Instead, it was a wonderful stimulant to the entire European Romanticism.

Passion for searching, for displaying and evaluating the oral literature has accompanied the cultural life of a century and gave writers many motives for a new creative space, perhaps unimagined until then.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a big fan of poetry of Ossian, same as many writers and poets elsewhere in Europe. A parallel was Gavril Dara Jr., who published his poem "The last song of Bala" and claimed that he had found in the summary with the folk songs of his grandfather fragments of an ancient epic poem of Albanian folk singer named Bale.

The most prominent personalities of the Albanian Renaissance dealt with this "duty" open up to them and they already have fulfilled it. The efforts made by almost every author of Renaissance to highlight the values of his nation have converged on a very large flow and special editions, which are now the basis of reference for any serious scholar concerned about popular culture.

De Rada with the help and "network" created through direct correspondence with prominent figures of Europe and Albania, interested in Albanian studies in the nineteenth century, certainly ranks among the pioneers for his great work about revaluing and publishing of folklore material. His name appears as a catalyst, as Robert Elsie¹ will describe him a century later.

De Rada has held the correspondence with Mitko (1820-1890), Zef Jubani (1818-1880), Sami Frashëri (1850-1904) and Dora D'Istria (1828-1888). Also, he has been in contact with other foreign researchers, interested in Albania, as the French scholar Auguste Dozon (1822 - 1891), Baroness Josephine von Knorr (1827-1908) and Austrian linguist Gustav Meyer (1850-1900). De Rada was encouraged also by the poet Alphonse de Lamartine French politician (1790-1869), and the Provençal poet Frederic Mistral (1830-1914).

A few decades after the publication and success of "Songs of Milosao" his poem that is compared with the novel in verse, among the great literatures of the time, De Rada published in Naples

¹ Elsie, Robert, *Historia e Letërsisë Shqiptare*, Tiranë- Pejë, 1997, page 159-161.

"Antiquity of the Albanian nation and its kindred with the Greeks and Latins" in 1864 (English translation of "The Albanese nazione Antichita della sua con gli affinita elleni and the Latini"). He also published in Florence in 1866 "Rhapsody of a poem Albanian settlements collected by the province of Naples" (English translation of "Rhapsody Albanese d'un poems raccolte Nell colonie del Napolitano").

Documentation of the immurement ballad

Researchers who have contributed to the immurement ballad in the Balkans have always had on hand an earlier version published by Vuk Karadzic, ballad "The construction of the fortress of Shkodra" that was thought to have arrived to Goethe in 1824 by Jakob Grimm, who had translated the publication of Karadzic.

Albanian studies have launched the publication of this ballad for the first time by Thimi Mitko, during 1868-1978. Just at this time it is documented in the "Albanian Bee" (English translation of "Bleta shqiptare"). Thimi Mitko has the merit as collector and scholar in the same time.

We cannot ignore the efforts of the Franciscan priests and the results that were finalized with the publication of "Treasures of the Nation" (English translation of "Visaret e kombit"). The names of Donat Kurti, Bernardin Palaj, George Fishta, Ernest Koliqi are some of the most important personalities regarding the collection and publication of Albanian folklore, including ballads.

Another generation, who worked more in studying and comparing the Albanian folklore, is that of Eqerem Çabej, Aleks Buda, Idriz Ajeti and Rexhep Qosja.

Researchers such as Qemal Haxhihasani, Zihni SaKo, Vili Kamsi, Jorgo Panajoti, Gjergj Zheji, Mark Tirta are noticed more because, at least once, they dealt directly with the immurement ballad among the Albanians. Prominent writers such as Ismail Kadare, Fatos Arapi, also come with special monographic folklore studies, which were focused on this ballad. Kadare's work is known for reclaiming the theme of

sacrifice in literature, in a case symbolically for the castle and in another case for the bridge.

While Anton Papeleka and Sadri Fetiu, in their publications go further studying the immurement ballad in a more comprehensive approach.

After the search path for this ballad, which was opened by Mitko, more variants are collected time after time and by 1965 texts were recorded (of which 22 recorded: 19 of them are for the castles and 13 are for bridges) in 150 localities. The analysis of these texts shows that more variants are about the immurement into the castle, than about the bridge, while the number of ballads for the church is relatively small.²

As many scholars have noticed, it is clear that there is a difference between non-institutional studies and those that were committed as a scientific "enterprise," if the courage to use this label is not excessive.

Nowadays, only a few studies that circulate have illuminated the ballad of the walled up woman in many aspects. But, it is notable that in almost all published materials there are a few Albanian variants. And even when foreigner scholars are taken to review, this ballad remains mostly in a descriptive stage.

Only in recent years, scholars like Shaban Sinani and Ardian Klosi, have viewed in more depth the interpretation of ballad and its connections with the rite of sacrifice. By narrowing the circle of tasks, which they undertake to solve in their work, they manage to become an inspiration for other research and stimulate the imagination of the younger researchers to be followers in this newly opened path.

In this regard they also seize all what circulates in contemporary studies, and so bring the issue of immurement ballad (as far as taking into account) in a completely different context.

Contemplation and interpretation of the ballad at the same time with the rite of sacrifice, changes their previous reports, by establishing the priority of chronology: so first it is examined the

² Sako, Zihni, "Balada shqiptare për murimin dhe elementet e saj të përbashkëta me motërzimet ballkanike", *Studime filologjike*, 1967, nr 2, page 87-92.

sacrifice in some of its aspects and then the ballad, as a material which is derived from this ritual.

Influence on research

Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941), a social anthropologist from Scotland, was the one that influenced the earlier and the contemporary studies, also the comparative mythology to religion. The most famous work remains "The Golden Bough" (1890), a study based on documents and details related to magic and religious beliefs worldwide. Frazer gives some positions of the trust in human being. He defines the progress in three stages: primitive magic in it, the return of religion and turning to science.

It may be mentioned as a key facilitator to the open perception of the pioneer of anthropological structuralism (but not only), Claude Levi-Strauss, whose outcomes since 1958 found the application field in similar disciplines. He considers culture as a symbolic system of communication, which has to be investigated by methods not used previously. Also Ferdinand De Saussure with his Course of General Linguistics becomes messenger of structuralism to all areas of humanity sciences.

For earlier, it is important to be referred to theories, which was used in folklore studies. Even because ballads were not involved in the theory of migration of motives from scholar Theodor Benfey, nor in the theory of "processing" according to the morphology of the tale, by the Russian Alexander Propp, it still were not left out of these treatments.

Benfey, German philologist (1809-1881) who spent part of life in the East, studied the theory that, a large part of European folklore motives has an Indian origin. Likewise Cloustron William (1843-1896). Others were followers Cosquin Emmanuel and Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916). Max Muller was also a follower of this theory, though never set foot in India.³

³ Enciklopedia online Enkarta 2002, <http://www.encartaencyclopedia.com/>

But among the Balkan scholars seems that these theories are not overlooked. They behave in a different direction of the pilgrimage, as, for example, researcher Mikhail Arnaudov⁴ that shows the direction of migration from Greece to the North and East of the Balkans for ballads. While if we refer to the morphology of tales, the archetypes, the variants and morphology itself are acceptable almost by every scholar who was concerned about ballad in the Balkans.

Among other researchers, mostly out of Balkans, the interpretation of the ballad in other point of view brings out other results. So Julia Kristeva⁵ in her "feminist" position has opened a new way of interpretation of walled up woman ballad. Also Alan Dundes⁶, speaks of a gender approach to it. The contemplation of ballad as a "duel" between matriarchy and patriarchy, and many other relations, make it an interesting approach.

Some conclusions

Referring to a rich material in terms of ethnological, mythological and anthropological studies about the immurement ballad, noted that there is always a tendency to "nationalized, privatized" several versions and left out some other attention. Albanian variants have always been scarce in circulation and one of the disadvantages of Albanians has been inadequate or bad translation variants in cases where they have been published.

However, so far from the Albanian scholars are taken into account in a great measure data for human sacrifice, for the gradual transfer of its talismans sacrifice, shadow then the sacrifice of animals. They handled the transition from one form to another. There are presented variants of sacrifices, pagan religion, their characteristics and traits to certain races and religions. Recently it is also shown the close link rite-ballad.

⁴ Arnaudov, Mikhail, *Oçerci po bëllgarskija folklor*, Akademično Izdatelstvo, Sofje, 1996, page 687.

⁵ Jefferson, Ann and Robery, David, *Teoria letrare moderne*, Tiranë, 2004, page 308-309.

⁶ Dundes, Allan, *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 108, 1995, f. 38-53.

Bibliography

- Elsie, Robert. *Historia e Letërsisë Shqiptare*, Tiranë- Pejë, (1997): 159-161
- Sako, Zihni. "Balada shqiptare për murimin dhe elementet e saj të përbashkëta me motërzimet ballkanike", *Studime filologjike*, nr 2, (1967): 87-92
- Enciklopedia online Enkarta 2002, www.encartaencyclopedia.com/
- Arnaudov, Mikhail. *Oçerci po bllgarskija folklor*, Sofje, Akademično Izdatelstvo, (1996): 687
- Jefferson, Ann. & Robery, David. *Teoria letrare moderne*, Tiranë, (2004): 308-309
- Dundes, Alan. *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 108, (1995): 38-53