

# *The Epic of the Kreshniks in the literature of Ismail Kadare and a description of the rhapsodes of the Albanian mountains*

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## **Abstract**

*In 1953, Milman Parry and Albert Lord published “Serbo-Croatian heroic songs”, to prove that the Homeric tradition of epic poetry was still alive in the Balkans of that time. The writer Ismail Kadare, seduced by this hypothesis, created the novel “The H File”, the content of which includes two fictional Irish-American researchers, Max Rothi and Vili Nortoni, who set out for the deep mountains of pre-war Northern Albania. Referring to the Epic of the Kreshniks as one of the most important artistic pillars of the spiritual culture of Albanians, the research of legendary epic songs testifies, among others, to their connection with lyrical epic songs.*

**Key words:** *rhapsodes, lyrics, songs*

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In 1953, Milman Parry and Albert Lord published “Serbo-Croatian heroic songs”, to prove that the Homeric tradition of epic poetry was still alive in the Balkans of that time. One of the testimonies for this continuity comes from the main subject of this study, the rhapsodist of Albanian origin from Sanjak, Salih Ugljanin, capable of reciting for hours Serbo-Croatian and Albanian epic poems about heroic acts of the past. This is where the discussions regarding the beginnings of epic poetry in the Balkans originate. In the context of the Kreshniks’ Epic, it is unknown whether the Albanian songs of the Kreshniks were inspired by the Serbo-Croatian ones or the other way around. The centers of the epic rhapsodes seem to have been the mountainous regions of Bosnia, Sanxhak i Novi Pazar, Montenegro and Northern Albania, although surprisingly most of the Albanian epics are set in Jutbina (Udbina), a village fifty kilometers in northeast of Zadar in Croatia as Robert Elsie would say (Elsie 1995).

Another issue that has been raised is the question of a possible connection between the Balkan heroic epic and the highly prized epic of the ancient Greeks. Is this not the epic and heroic poetry, which is still sung by the Albanians and the southern Slavs, the successor of the Homeric epic? The writer Ismail Kadare, seduced by this hypothesis, created the novel “*The H File*”, the content of which includes two fictional Irish-American researchers, Max Rothi and Vili Nortoni, who set out for the deep mountains of pre-war Northern Albania, with camera in arms for a dual purpose. First, they are looking for the birthplace of the epic, and second, they investigate the possibility of a direct connection between the Homeric epic and the heroic epic, whose songs are performed by the Hijerenda highlanders of Northern Albania with their one-stringed lutes, as the main instruments for conveying the songs of the Kreshnik Epic.

Kadare (Kadare 1990) put both researchers, in an unclear situation “*since this (epic) is the only artistic creation in the world that exists in two languages... in two languages of two warring nations... Albanian and Serbian...*” Furthermore “*It is naive to believe that the epic arose independently in the two peoples. Someone must be the author and someone the imitator. We have an inner conviction that the Albanians, as the most ancient inhabitants of the peninsula, created it first (The fact that their sisterhood is much closer to the Homeric dough proves this).*”

The field trip of the foreign researchers created a feeling of suspicion especially for the sub-prefect of the province, who sent the secret agent Dulle Baxhaja behind them to observe them and bring information about their activities and movements. The same suspicious attitude towards the researchers, for a possible spin, was also born among the local residents. Thus, their apartment in Rrashtbualli Inn is raided, and the device that recorded their voices is destroyed, which also marks the end of their research mission in Albania.

Albanologist Robert Elsie described (Elsia 1995) the work “*The H-File*” as a pleasant satire about two innocent foreigners who try to understand the Albanian spirit and, especially, the quirks of Albanian life with which foreign visitors are

often amazed: the Balkan penchant for gossip and backbiting, the incompetence of the administration, as well as a childish sense of fear and suspicion on the part of the authorities for anything foreign.

Referring to the Epic of the Kreshniks, profesor Zymer Neziri (Neziri 2010) says that is one of the most important artistic pillars of the spiritual culture of Albanians, the research of legendary epic songs testifies, among others, to their connection with lyrical epic songs. Epicologist D. Shala (Shala 1985) underlines: *“Illyrian epic life during the centuries-long period of war and uprisings against the Romans has produced epic songs, which are the connecting link with the Kreshnik Epic.”* Despite the lack of evidence for Illyrian epic songs, the above assertion is supported by other historical and archaeological evidence. Also, a testimony in the linguistic field comes from the Croatian linguist R. Katicic (Katićiq 1988), who talks about the age-old formulas of epic songs in Illyria, based on Illyrian anthroponomic and homonymic evidence.

In this context, M.W.M. Pope would say that (Pope) *“Epic poetry, which still exists in some parts of the world and once existed in many more, is specifically the singing of stories. It is normal to accompany them with instrumental music, and it is generally played by the singer himself. The singer is not just a reciter. He composes the songs. He must be sensitive both to the occasion and to the audience ... He can corrupt a good story, or he can improve and set right a story which he received from tradition in a corrupt state. He is not simply a person who repeats to the extreme what he has learned. He is a creative artist.”*

Nicola Lo Russo Attoma (Ghiglione 1941), with a study of the rhapsodes of the Albanian mountains, would describe the Albanian rhapsody like this: *“Accompanied by the lute, the rhapsody singer of the mountains, after a prelude of melodies that repeat the simple motifs of pastoral work, begins to sing. And, more than anything else, a revelation, at first slow, then ever hotter, alive; the singer articulates ten syllables that tell wonderful facts. History and legend are intertwined. Heroes, men-at-arms, women, myths, distant ages live in poetic re-enactment in the events of love and hate, peace, war...”*

Since the lute is the main instrument for conveying the songs of the Kreshnik Epic, the rhapsody takes the name lute. Prof. Eqrem Çabej, writing about (Çabej 1975) the epic songs of the Albanians, claims that *“in the north these songs are played with the lute”*. The lute is among the most popular one-stringed folk instruments played with a bent-hair bow that is mainly used in Northern Albania and Kosovo. The lute, unlike other instruments, has not only had a musical and entertaining function, but for Ramadan Sokoli (Sokoli 1981) has accompanied the songs that exalt the activity of the brave. Traditionally the lute instrument is produced by the rhapsodists themselves who sing and perform on it. The widest and most complete repertoire of these troves is the *“Eposi i Kreshnikëve”*, which is sung with a lute. For profesor Shaban Sinani, lute has risen to cult status (Sinani 2000). The cult of the lute in the Albanian family is widespread, just as there is a sanctifying respect for the songs of the Kreshniks. Many authors have written about the construction, functions

and symbolism of the lute. For profesor Vasil Tole (Tole 2010), very verses of the epic speak of its construction: “*How well Muji is remembered, then he took the big sword, then he went out to the mountain ash, he brought the lute from the mountain, he put the slang from the donkey, he put his race it’s not red.*” For Bernardin Palajt: “*the lute is a primitive and simple tool. It consists of a wooden cup in the shape of an egg covered with skin, which is called a shark, and it has a not very long tail.*”

The lute of our northern highlanders represents the most ancient archetype of bowed chordophone instruments of the European continent, and for Pirro Misso, a house without a lute in the north is called a “abandoned house”(Miso 1990). Fishta (Fishta 1981) considers the lute as “an instrument very liked by the people of our mountains, with which they sing their praises or lament their pain”.

According to prof. Ramadan Sokolit, the head on the tail of the lute, in the form of a goat is a symbol of our national hero, Skenderbeu, while according to prof. Vasil S. Toles (Tole 2010), may be an earlier symbol of the mountain fairies. Despite the symbolism, for Asdren “The sweet fairy of the lute/This is the kanga of the Highlands”.

For Supan (Folklori 1989), epic without music does not exist and a text without music can never be epic. In this context, for Ernest Koliqi(Koliqi 2002), the legendary musical narratives of the epic of the Kreshniks centered on the main characters of Muji and Halil, created and accompanied by the lute, constitute a poetic and ethnocultural complex.

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