

The Rediscovery of Folk Literature in Albania

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The literary and cultural awakening of the Albanian people in the second half of the nineteenth century was not simply a matter of using Albanian in schools and in the production and publication of artistic prose, poetry and journalism. It also involved and depended upon a return to sources and a search for roots. Though written literature in Albanian had been sporadic and, due in great part to the torturous course of Albanian history, had not been able to reach its full potential, Albania's folklore traditions, i.e. oral literature, had always made up for the deficiency. These constituted a rich cultural asset at the disposal of the ideologists of the Rilindja period of national awakening. National identity lay dormant in the country's folklore, waiting to be rediscovered.

The romantic movement in Europe had stimulated an interest in folklore traditions and oral literature. Albanian folk songs and folk tales caught the imagination not only of Albanian writers of the national awakening but also of foreign scholars and linguists in the nineteenth century. Indeed the earliest collection of Albanian oral literature, *Albanesische Studien* (Albanian Studies) was published in German by the Austrian consul Johann Georg von Hahn. Often considered the father of Albanian studies, Hahn travelled widely throughout Albania and the Balkans, and he appended folk songs, sayings and tales to his grammar of the Tosk dialect. Ten years later he also published a collection of Greek and Albanian folk tales. The German physician Karl Heinrich Theodor Reinhold from Göttingen became acquainted with Albanian folklore from Albanian sailors while he was serving as a doctor in the Greek navy. He later published a noted collection of Albanian folk songs, tales and sayings with an Albanian grammar in his *Noctes Pelasgicae* (Pelasgian Nights). In Italy, folk verse was compiled by various Arbëresh writers from the eighteenth century onwards; furthermore, the folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè published a selection of Albanian folk tales from Sicily in *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* (Sicilian Fables, Short Stories and Folk Tales). The French consul Auguste Dozon, who was stationed in Janina and Thessalonika, published Albanian folk tales and songs originally in his *Manuel de la langue chkipe ou albanaise* (Manual of the Shkip or Albanian Language) and two years later in a special volume entitled *Contes albanais, recueillis et traduits* (Albanian Tales, Collected and Translated). The Czech linguist, Jan Urban Jarník, professor of Romance languages and literature, published Albanian folklore material from the Shkodra region in *Zur albanischen Sprachkunde* (On Albanian Linguistics), and a collection of tales and anecdotes, again from Shkodra, in *Příspěvky ku poznání nářečí albánských uveřejňuje* (Contributions to the Knowledge of Albanian Dialects). Gustav Meyer, professor at the University of Graz, published fourteen Albanian tales in *Albanische Märchen* (Albanian Tales), and a selection of Tosk tales appended to his Albanian grammar (1888). Much of his folklore material was republished in vols. 5 and 6 of his *Albanesische Studien* (Albanian Studies). Renowned Danish Indo-Europeanist Holger Pedersen, professor at the University of Copenhagen, visited Albania in 1893 to learn the language and to gather linguistic material. His *Albanesische Texte mit Glossar* (Albanian Texts with Glossary) contains thirty-five Albanian folk tales he recorded there and in Corfu.

While foreign scholars first provided provided Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century with Albanian folklore, and thus set the pace for the scholarly study of Albanian oral literature, Albanian scholars directed their publications at their compatriots, fuelling the national awakening with a sense of tradition and identity. One of the early Albanian "discoverers" of this national heritage was Zef Jubani, known in Italian as

Giuseppe Jubany, who is thought to have been born in Shkodra of an Albanian father and Maltese mother. After his studies at a school of commerce in Malta, where he stayed 1830-1838 with his uncle, he returned to Shkodra and served for several years from 1848 onward as *dragoman* (interpreter) to Louis Hyacinthe Hécquard, French consul in Shkodra, who was preparing a book on northern Albania. Hécquard was very interested in folklore and took the young Jubani with him on his exhausting journeys through the northern Albanian mountains. A number of the folk songs they collected appeared in French translation in Hécquard's pioneering *Histoire et description de la Haute Albanie ou Guégarie* (History and Description of High Albania or Gegaria"). Jubani's own first collection of folklore, no doubt the original Albanian texts of the songs published by Hécquard, was unfortunately lost in the flood that devastated the city of Shkodra on January 13, 1866. Jubani is best remembered for his *Raccolta di canti popolari e rapsodie di poemi albanesi* (Collection of Albanian Folk Songs and Rhapsodies), which constitutes the first collection of Geg folk songs, indeed the first work of folklore to be published by an Albanian from Albania itself.

The second important Albanian collector of Albanian oral literature was the folklorist and nationalist Thimi Mitko of Korça, a prominent representative of the rising Albanian colony in Egypt. Mitko began to take an interest in folklore about 1859 while in Vienna. From Spiro Dine we know that Mitko had begun recording folklore material by 1866, providing folk songs, riddles and tales for Demetrio Camarda's collection. Mitko's own collection of Albanian folklore, consisting of 505 folk songs, and 39 tales and popular sayings primarily from southern Albania, was finished in 1874 and published in Greek script four years later under the Greek title *Albanikê melissa* (The Albanian Bee); an Albanian translation was provided in the subtitle. A copy of the book is said to have been burnt in public in Athens by Greek extremists. This was not only the first compilation of oral literature designed for the Albanian public, but also the first collection of genuinely scholarly interest. Sporadic earlier publications had not shown Albanian oral literature at its best nor presented its full geographical or thematic scope. Mitko endeavoured to present and preserve the full national heritage of oral literature, compiling and classifying the material according to genres, including, for instance, sections on children's songs, songs of seasonal festivities, love songs, wedding songs, funerary songs, epic and historical songs, as well as fairy tales, fables and anecdotes. He also added an Albanian-Greek vocabulary. *The Albanian Bee* thus constituted a fundamental work on Albanian oral literature. However, the Romantic Movement and its interest in oral literature and folklore had waned by 1878 in Western Europe, and Mitko's collection did not receive the international attention it deserved. It became better known when Gjergj Pekmezi republished it in 1924, using the modern Albanian alphabet.

Thimi Mitko's endeavours were furthered by his fellow countryman Spiro Risto Dine from Vithkuq in the Korça region. Dine emigrated to Egypt in 1866, approximately one year after Thimi Mitko. The two met there and soon collaborated on Mitko's collection. Dine himself is remembered for his only significant publication, the monumental collection of Albanian folklore and literature *Valët e detit* (The Waves of the Sea), whose title symbolizes the tempestuous course of Albania's history and the successive waves of invasions that overwhelmed it. Its first part contains some of Dine's own patriotic verse, none of which is particularly inspiring for the modern reader, as well as poetry by Koto Hoxhi, Thimi Thoma Kreji, Kostandin Kristoforidhi, Anastas Kullurioti, Loni Logori, Jani Vreto, and other writers and nationalist leaders of the Rilindja period. The second part of the work is devoted to folk literature, including love songs, wedding songs, funerary songs, light-hearted satirical verse, some religious and didactic verse, folk tales, aphorisms, rhymes, popular beliefs and mythology. At the time of publication, *Valët e detit* was the longest book printed in Albanian.

Shtjefën Gjeçovi of Janjeva in Kosova was the first Albanian folklorist to collect oral literature in a more scholarly and systematic manner. In 1896, Gjeçovi was ordained as

a priest of the Franciscan order and returned to Albania. He lived in a number of rugged mountain settlements in northern Albania, including Laç at the foot of the Kurbin mountains, Gomsiqja east of Shkodra, Theth in the far north, and Rubik in the Mirdita district. He began compiling material on oral literature, tribal law, archeology and folklore among the mountain tribes. Gjeçovi made his mark on Albanian culture through his monumental codification and publication of Albanian tribal law, the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* (The Code of Lekë Dukagjini), which he published extensively in the Shkodra periodical *Hylli i dritës* (The Day-Star) from 1913 to 1924. This Code or Canon is a unique compilation of orally transmitted law that governed and regulated social behaviour, indeed almost every facet of life among the tribes in the isolated and otherwise lawless terrain of the northern highlands of Albania. The code was strictly observed by the tribes and had priority over all other laws, ecclesiastical or secular, that were imposed in the mountains. The mountain tribes were able to preserve their identity and autonomy with the help of this ancient code, even though they were ostensibly part of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. *The Code of Lekë Dukagjini* has been of great interest among historians, legal experts and ethnographers, not only in Albania and Kosova but also abroad: the Scottish Albanologist Margaret Hasluck studied it in *The Unwritten Law in Albania*. It has been translated into Italian (1941), English (1989) and German (2001).

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