

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ANTIHEROES IN ALBANIAN AND SOUTH SLAVIC EPIC SONGS

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Abstract

In this study, through a comparative analysis, I aim to explore a significant aspect of folk art that is rooted in a distant historical past. The most representative songs that express the theme of antiheroes are Gjergj Elez Alija among the Albanians and Bolen Dojčin among the South Slavs. An analysis of these songs — in all their variants — reveals that these epic heroes are similar not only in terms of their actions but also in their artistic portrayal, particularly in the stylistic devices used to present them.

These songs, centered around the aforementioned theme, were collected by several renowned folklorists, who thus preserved them from the “teeth” of time and made it possible for them to be studied even today. Based on these collected works, various folklore scholars have attempted to identify both the shared and the unique elements present in each tradition.

The content of these songs revolves around antiheroes who confront ailing or weakened heroes. In such a condition, the antihero becomes a symbol of violence or evil. These figures typically pose a threat to the honor of the hero’s family—most often his sister—and, by extension, the honor of the entire community. This threat is portrayed using motifs associated with slavery, personified by figures such as the Black Arab (Arap i Zi) or Bajlozi.

The treatment of this topic is based on the analysis of several traditional songs, as well as scholarly literature authored by prominent researchers in the field. A comparative method is employed to highlight both the commonalities and specific characteristics found within these narratives.

Keywords: Gjergj Elez Alija, Bajloz, Arapi i zi, folk songs, comparison.

The Appearance and Purpose of Antiheroes

In epic and balladic folk traditions, the formulaic figure of the Arap emerges as a result of historical and cultural connections with the Arab world, as well as in function of the evolutionary, transitional movement of the epic genre from myth to history. In both epic and balladic genres—often difficult to distinguish—the universal motif of the abduction of a young girl or woman appears as fundamental. In prose, where the influence of oriental traditions is more recent and more prominent, the figure of the Arap transitions from song to narrative form. This transformation is largely shaped by the point of view of protagonists undergoing symbolic initiation.¹

A defining characteristic of the heroic epic is heroism itself, which arises in a society threatened by a powerful rival, typically embodied in the figure of the Black Arap, Bajloz, or other similar antagonists.²

The concepts of heroism and antiheroism, as well as the function of epic in folklore and literature, have been extensively theorized by Vladimir Propp, Albert B. Lord, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Each of these scholars contributed foundational frameworks that help us understand how narrative structures and cultural values are embedded in traditional and literary storytelling.

¹ Изанм Муртезани, *Митски елементи во албанскиот и македонскиот јуначки епос и балада*, Институт за фолклор „Марко Цепенков“, Скопје, p. 54.

² Изанм Муртезани, *Митски елементи во албанскиот и македонскиот јуначки епос и балада*, Институт за фолклор „Марко Цепенков“, Скопје, p. 57.

Vladimir Propp, in his seminal work *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), introduced a structuralist analysis of Russian folktales, identifying thirty-one narrative functions that occur in a fixed sequence. For Propp, heroism is defined functionally: the hero is a character who responds to a lack or a misfortune and embarks on a journey involving trials, helpers, and ultimate reward. This structural role, rather than moral quality, is what constitutes heroism. Propp also identified the figure of the "false hero," an individual who mimics heroic actions but is eventually exposed, offering a structural basis for understanding early forms of antiheroism. The epic function, in Propp's theory, lies in reinforcing moral order and social norms through repeated narrative patterns that transcend individual characters or settings.

Albert B. Lord, building on the work of Milman Parry, developed the oral-formulaic theory in *The Singer of Tales* (1960). Studying South Slavic epic singers and Homeric poetry, Lord argued that epic traditions are rooted in oral performance and shaped by formulaic expressions and recurring themes. In this framework, heroism is not a personal attribute but a culturally sanctioned role that preserved and transmitted through performance. Epic heroes are emblematic figures whose stories are communally constructed and remembered. Though Lord does not emphasize antiheroism, deviations from heroic norms or failures of heroic characters can be viewed as nascent forms of antiheroic representation. The epic serves a social function as a vessel of communal identity, memory, and continuity, ensuring that the values of the past are carried into the present.

Mikhail Bakhtin offers a contrasting perspective in his essay "Epic and Novel," found in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). Bakhtin critiques the monologic nature of epic, where the hero is idealized, static, and distant from the contemporary world. The epic, in Bakhtin's view, exists in a "national heroic past" that is closed to re-interpretation. In contrast, the novel introduces dialogism, heterogloss

These antiheroes often commit such excessive violence that they compel the hero to act decisively to defend personal and collective honor, loved ones, and the homeland. It is these antiheroes we analyze in both Albanian literature and the traditions of South Slavic peoples. Through comparative analysis, we aim to understand how such figures were imagined by their respective cultures, and to identify both the shared and distinct features of their songs. This comparison offers valuable insights into the historical contexts in which these heroes and antiheroes were most likely formed.

Where there are heroes, antiheroes inevitably follow—serving to elevate the hero's deeds and enriching the broader tapestry of folk creativity. A distinctive feature of the heroic epic is the presence of such figures, who, despite their anthropomorphic appearance, are endowed with supernatural strength due to their exaggerated physical attributes. Folk creators often portray them as mythical beings with otherworldly powers.

One of the clearest differences between Albanian and Macedonian epic songs lies in the geographic origin of these characters. That is, the location from which they appear and where they challenge heroes like Mujo and Krali Marko. This distinction is also noted by the Albanian folklorist Qemal Haxhihasani, who observes:

"Almost all Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Romanian versions, in terms of their genesis and development, are marked by an eastern setting. Events are often localized in Thessaloniki (sometimes Constantinople). Bajlozi and Araps appear there, tribute is demanded and wars erupt. In contrast, the Albanian versions never mention Thessaloniki. Bajlozi and Araps always come as monsters, typically from the sea, arriving at coastal locations such as Durrës or Shkodër."³

Following historical or oral traditions, similar legends have circulated along the Adriatic for centuries. A chronicle from Ragusa mentions: "Primorj e (in the Balkans) and in Dalmatia and

³ . Qemal Haxhihasani, "Gjergj Elez Alija. Gjenezja, zhvillimi, tipologjia." Çështje të folklorit shqiptar I. Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, Tiranë: 1997, pp. 21–22.

in Arbëria.” From this, two key facts emerge: a) the legend of the monster’s presence has circulated in the Balkans since at least the end of the 8th century, and b) this legend was widespread along the western coast of the peninsula.⁴

Haxhihasani also argues that these legends, born under specific historical and social conditions, may have directly influenced the genesis of these songs.

Stylistic Figures as Epic Elements

In accordance with the mythical archetype, demons are frequently portrayed as having multiple heads—an attribute that is sometimes extended to the characters discussed in the previous sections. For instance, in Albanian epic poetry, this characteristic appears in verses such as:

Eje, Zoti e vraft, ej, Harap, Zullumcarin / E a vesh kaurri⁵ n’çelik-e e puncir⁶
 (“Ej, God kill him, ej, Harap the Tyrant! / He has three heads on his
 shoulders, / He has dressed the kaur in steel and armor”).⁷

Similarly, in Macedonian folk songs, the figure of the Arap is depicted with exaggerated mythical features. For example:

Главам е петнаесет ока, / Горна рилка до чело му била, / Долна рилка,
 богме, до појаси⁸

(“My head has fifteen eyes, / The upper nostril reached his forehead, / The lower nostril, by God, reached his waist”).

The physical appearance of Crna Arapina is conveyed indirectly in some variants, primarily through the descriptions embedded in his duels with Dojčin, where the opponents exchange insulting remarks. In one such example, he is described as “very bulky” and is addressed with the phrase, “quite just, he says to the pap, / upper mouth, come on, to the chelbina!”⁹ (A 10). The epithet black becomes a permanent identifier, as in Crna Arapina, paralleling Bolen Dojchin, whose name includes the epithet sick. In most instances, the Arapina remains unnamed, though in variants B13 and B35, he is identified as Memed(ina) or Juso.¹⁰

His excessive appetite and demands fluctuate across variants, yet they are typically conveyed through the folkloric use of the numbers three or nine—symbolic quantities in oral tradition. These demands often include bread, barrels of wine and rakia, cows, and heifers.¹¹

From a semantic standpoint, these epic antagonists consistently symbolize violence, overwhelming force, slavery, and tribute. In Macedonian epics especially, the character of the black Arap is emblematic of oppression, often portrayed carrying three chains of slavery. For instance:

Шо помина црна Арапина, / шо носеше три синцири робје, / прво робје
 се’ млади момчиња, / второ робје се’ млади невести, / трети робје се’
 добри девојки

(“What has passed, the black Arap, / who carried three chains of slavery, / the first chain held young boys, / the second chain held young brides, / the third chain held good girls.”)

⁴ . Qemal Haxhihasani, “Gjergj Elez Alija. Gjenezja, zhvillimi, tipologjia.” *Çështje të folklorit shqiptar I*. Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, Tiranë: 1997, pp. 23.

⁵ **Giaour** or **Gawur** or **Gavour** (/ˈdʒəʊər/; **Turkish**: *gâvur*, Turkish pronunciation: **Albanian**: *kaur*; **Bosnian**: *kaur/daur*) meaning “infidel”, is a slur used mostly in the lands of the former **Ottoman Empire** for **non-Muslims** or, more particularly, **Christians** in the **Balkans**.

⁶ Bulletproof vest

⁷ Zymer Neziri, *Epika legjendare e Rugovës V, Këngë kreshnike dhe balada*, Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 1997, p. 110.

⁸ Marko Cepenkov, *Folk Songs*, Book One, Macedonian Book, Institute of Folklore, Skopje, 1980, p. 72.

⁹ In Macedonian Chelbina (челбина) is a traditional fermented drink made by mixing water with a small amount of flour (usually wheat) and a bit of salt of yogurt. It’s a very simple beverage, often associated with rural areas and older generation.

¹⁰ Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија.. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје1988, p.335.

¹¹ Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија.. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје1988, p.336

This figure is particularly striking in the songs surrounding Bolen Dojchin, which stand out for their artistic achievement. In these, the black Arap is depicted as gluttonous and insatiable in the satisfaction of his physical needs. For example:

Бог го убил еден црн Арапин, / Црн Арапин од Арапска земја, / Излегол
је на солунско поле, / Побил копје, та ја врзал коња, / Ату реди низ
Солума града. / Редом реди, ама с тајин јаде, / На ден му ја една фурна
леба, / Фурна леба и крава јалова. / Вода му је една бочва вино, / На
нош љуби по една девојка. Сега време до девет години / Ка си реди низ
Солуна града. / Со ред дојде и на наша кашча

("God killed a black Arap, / A black Arab from the land of Arabia, / He stepped into the field of Thessaloniki, / Planted his spear, tied his horse, / He marched through the city of Thessaloniki. / He marched, but secretly feasted, / One oven of bread per day, / An oven of bread and a barren cow. / His drink was a barrel of wine, / Each night he loved a girl. / Nine years he has passed through Thessaloniki. / Now he has come to our home as well."¹²

Parallels exist in the Albanian oral tradition as well, where the intruder, depicted as a black Arap or black Bajloz, imposes harsh conditions on the local population. Though demythologized to some extent by the folk artist, these figures nonetheless embody a potent artistic construct in which all negative human characteristics are concentrated. Particularly notable is the persistent association of the color black with these characters. As a symbolic contrast to white and light—associated with purity and divinity—black is connected to darkness and chaos. Demonic and dark deities often reinforce the metaphorical and archetypal significance of black as a representation of primordial disorder, the underworld, and destruction. In pre-monotheistic belief systems characterized by unarticulated dualisms between gods and demons, or celestial beings and mortals, black was not exclusively a signifier of evil, but also of fertile chaos and transformation.

The Duel of the Two Opposing Heroes

In all versions of the folk poems, an inevitable physical duel takes place between the Albanian Gjergj Elez Alija or the Macedonian Bolen Dojcin and the thug figure—incarnated as the black Bajloz or Arap. The epilogue of this physical confrontation favors the former protagonists, who, despite suffering from illness or injury, find the inner strength to confront the monstrous oppressors and ultimately triumph—not just for themselves but for the entire enslaved people. There is something Promethean in their heroic acts. Much like Prometheus who, after stealing fire, defies Zeus—resisting a god who wants to keep mankind dependent and powerless—the folk heroes also resist oppressive forces. They do so not in the realm of the gods, but in the very real world of human suffering, against threats embodied by the black Bajloz or Arap, who endanger the economic well-being, family honor, freedom, and lives of the people.

Through these battles, the heroes are elevated; their victory not only restores justice but also asserts their final, heroic feat. This is especially remarkable given their physical weakness due to illness, which makes their success even more meaningful. Their triumph under such conditions symbolizes resilience and moral superiority. In one variant of the Bolen Dojcin cycle, this miraculous victory is underscored with the verse: "Blessed is that mother who gave birth to him, thank God for the great miracle.

While Bolen Dojcin's death may seem like a logical conclusion to the motif of the sick hero, research reveals that in approximately twenty published and archival variants, Dojcin does not

¹² Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија.. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје 1988, 452.

die. In fact, the Cuckoo variant collected by the Miladinovci brothers ends not only with his victory but includes an excerpt from a local legend about the place where the Arap was buried.¹³ Scholars generally agree that the duel is more vividly portrayed and analyzed in the Albanian variant of the poem. Indeed, one can conclude that national heroes in folk epic poetry are created in times of great hardship—periods when people seek moral support and spiritual endurance. This need is met through the presence of a mighty anti-hero, whose strength and cruelty serve only to emphasize the moral and physical greatness of the national hero.

Origin and Mythical Elements

It should be emphasized that there are many works on the character of the Black Arab within the framework of Slavic culture. According to Ilarion Ruvarac, who was influenced by Miller's solar mythology, King Marko is a solar hero, and his opponents, including the Black Arap, are representatives of the underworld.

The author Halanski in the 19th century put forward the hypothesis that the Arap is connected with the reworking of the Christian legend of pagan origin about the war of St. George and the dragon.¹⁴

Considering the above, it can be concluded that the Black Arab and Bajloz are chthonic monsters.

As anthropomorphic rapists—plunderers of women and the wealth of the collective—the Black Arap appears as a character connected to the world of the chthonic. The Arap is also encountered as an anthropomorphic opponent—a foreigner, who imposes a marriage ban and a wedding tax. The Black Arap or the Bajloz in the capacity of foreigners, or incarnations of a foreign ethnicity, are encountered in both Albanian and Macedonian folk songs. Whichever one of them is always invading the space where the population lives, which is under the leadership of the main Albanian and Macedonian epic protagonists.

The Arap or the Bajloz are experienced as foreign rapists and as destabilizers of harmony in the space where they appear. But, despite these newer elements, there are still many mythical attributes in their characters that the folk creator could not give up. These attributes of theirs sometimes coincide with the attributes of the dragon. Thus, the Arap, in addition to having three heads, also breathes fire from his mouth.¹⁵

These features lead to the conclusion that this is still the decline of chivalry, its last manifestations, before the emergence of different forms of struggle, resistance, a national-protective role, and even social moral views and understandings. And the fact that this hero regularly dies after defeating the aggressor reveals that this is the last appearance of chivalry and its types of struggle and protection.

In the poem with Bolen Dojcin, in three variants, the Arap did not come alone, but with an army. This element is out of step with the dominant number of variants in which the Arap acts alone or has a very small entourage, and hence requires a special explanation. In fact, the question arises as to which variants are older and closer to the original form of the poem: those in which the Arap acts alone or those in which he has the support of his army?

The duties imposed upon the people by the Arap are not limited to those already mentioned. These obligations appear in various forms and intensities across all versions of *Bolen Dojcin*. In some variants, these obligations are expanded with additional demands. The reason for the Black Arap's presence in Thessaloniki (or Buda) is entirely absent in some variants. In two

¹³ Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија.. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје 1988, p.341

¹⁴ Božović, Rade. 1977. Arapi u usmenoj narodnoj pesmi na srpskohrvatskom jeziku području. Beograd: Filološki fakultet Beogradskog Univerziteta, Knj. XLVII p.349

¹⁵ Изаим Муртезани „Митски елементи во албанскиот и македонскиот јуначки епос и балада“, Институт за фолклор „Марко Цепенков“, Скопје, p.214

Tikvash versions, the arrival of the Arab is foreshadowed through a metaphor: Sea, a dark fog has settled, dark fog in the Thessaloniki field, It was not there, sea, dark fog, But you were a Black Arap...

"Dark fog" in these variants is undoubtedly borrowed from Macedonian folk battle poetry, where it traditionally symbolizes the arrival of an enemy force or adversary in general.¹⁶

To a certain extent, the figure of the Bajloz may also be identified with the Arap, a feature particularly common in Albanian epic songs. The term *bajloz* originally referred to 'the title of the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte'; over time, however, it came to denote 'a large, wild creature, a hero, or a monster.' Its etymology traces back to the French *bailli* (official, messenger), or the Latin *ballivus* (from *bajulus*, meaning carrier), and *ballia*, a term which survives in the German *Ballei*, referring to a province of a knightly religious order. The suffix -oz in *baloz* stems from Middle Greek.¹⁷

The Bajloz, like the Arap, sometimes emerges from the Black Sea and appears at the border of Jutbina, where Mujo's brotherhood resides. For instance:

E koka kanë ky bajloz i zi, / e kalon, more, krejt Detin e Zi, / o, qi po del, po, n'hudut t'Jutbines / edhe banrrën Jutbinës po m'ja rrxon, / rrafsh me tokë, thiue ka rrxue, / banrren e vetë ai aty e ka vñue¹⁸ (It was that black Bajloz, / he crossed, took, the whole Black Sea, / oh, he is coming out, yes, on the mountain of Jutbina / he is also radiating Jutbina's strength, / level with the ground, the sword has razed it, / he has put his own strength there).

The Bajloz then imposes excessive taxes on the local population. For example:

Nimijë copa gja trasha ua due, / nër katerqin kila, nja eksik se due, / ham te majshme, he says, me qillue, / dhetë vagana grun me i çirue / o, dhetë vagana grun me i ngarkue / e n hudut me mi çue¹⁹ (I want you a thousand head of cattle, / under four hundred kilograms, I don't want any of them / to be very big, / ten wagons of grain to prepare, / ten wagons to load grain, / and to the border, he says, to bring them to me).

Or:

O sha me pa po i seir te madh, / ni bajloz pi detit kish dalun, / haraç te madh popullit ja ka çitun, / haraç sa t,shtirë, jau ka lypun, e për nataë ka ni dash të pjekun, / ka ni vajzë po jau lyp me fjetun, / e i ngarkon me detyr të ranë.²⁰ (Oh what a great miracle to see, / a big ram came out of the sea, / he put a big burden on the people, / he asked them for a very heavy burden: / for each night a roasted ram, / he asks them for a girl to sleep with him, / and burdens them with a heavy task:).

These examples illustrate how the Bajloz, like the Arap, not only emerges from distant and often ominous spaces (such as the Black Sea), but also imposes violent and dehumanizing demands upon local populations, thus reinforcing his image as both a foreign threat and a mythical oppressor.

The victory over the Black Bajloz is compelling. When Mujo defeats him, he takes his head and carries it to his people. The head of Bajloz is then split into two parts, after which the celebration—or wedding—begins, symbolizing the banishment of evil. The wedding lasts for three weeks. These scenes are reminiscent of those found in cosmogonic myths of archaic cultures, where the defeat of a primordial destructive force is followed by ritualistic celebration. The Slavic peoples who settled in the Balkans, influenced by the indigenous populations, adopted the legend of the heroic horseman—a figure originally from the Thracian and Illyrian

¹⁶ Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија.. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје 1988, p.341

¹⁷ Qemal Haxhihasani, *Gjergj Elez Alija. Gjenezha, zhvillimi, tipologjia.* "Çështje të folklorit shqiptar I". Instituti i kulturës popullore, Tiranë: 1997. p.24.

¹⁸ Rustem Berisha, Sadri Fetiu, *Kënge kreshnike II*, Inst.Albanologjik, 1991, Prishtinë, p.3

¹⁹ Rustem Berisha, Sadri Fetiu, *Kënge kreshnike II*, Inst.Albanologjik, 1991, Prishtinë, p.4

²⁰ -Rustem Berisha, Sadri Fetiu, *Kënge kreshnike II*, Inst.Albanologjik, 1991, Prishtinë, p.179

pantheon. These deities were themselves shaped by Hellenic, Oriental, and Roman religious systems, which differed from the religious principles of the migrant Slavs.²¹

Adapting to this mythological content, it can be said that King Marko represents a transformation or hypostasis of the Thracian horseman, and is accepted as a national hero. Thus, the legend of King Marko attains the status of a significant national myth. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the motif of the horse appears across Germanic, Eastern Slavic, and Indian traditions, suggesting that this myth has a universal character.²²

The character of the Black Arab, in most versions, is described with monstrous features based on physical appearance. It seems that the poem **Bolen Dojčin** contains mythological elements, implying a relatively recent origin. In this context, Putilov's analysis of the Black Arab in **Bolen Dojčin**, and of his overall role in South Slavic epic poetry, suggests that his character resembles that of a dragon or monster.

Based on the material related to **Bolen Dojčin**, we disagree with attempts to link the Black Arab to any specific mythological monster—such as the theory proposed by V. Čajkanović, who believed the Black Arab embodies a dark memory of the Orthodox god Triglav or is a remnant of a black underworld deity. Instead, we propose that the monstrous image of the Arab symbolizes the terror of enslavement and the brutal violence inflicted on a city abandoned by its rightful master due to illness.

The recurring epithet 'Black Arab' or 'Black Arapian' alone does not suffice to equate him with a dragon, monster, or mythical remnant of a dark god. The term 'black' likely reflects a real attribute, just as 'sick' does in reference to Dojčin's condition. It is plausible that early historical encounters with Arabs—some of whom may have had dark skin—led our ancestors to interpret their appearance through a mythologizing worldview.

During periods of greater historical stability, the mythological connotations of the Black Arab diminished. These were eventually replaced or revived by a folkloric and neo-mythical reinterpretation of the Black Arab, often characterized by carnival, satirical, and erotic elements. These reflect the vivid cultural imagination of the medieval Mediterranean folklore tradition.²³

Bajloz as a Rival to Gjergj Elez Alija

The poem is dedicated to Gjergj Elez Alija, one of the most striking poems in Albanian poetry, according to A. Shmaus, belongs to the prototypes of the 15th century.²⁴

The variants of the poem from the Albanian epic are spread throughout all parts of the Kreshnik (legendary epic) poems and the further they move away, i.e., in the peripheral points in Western Macedonia, then in Shala e Bajgorës in Kosovo, etc., they lose some specificities and take on specific contents that have similar signals with the poems that have the same motif with the tradition of the epic among other Balkan peoples. So that only the spread of the theme and some characteristics of the variants as well as the aesthetic variant values and ethno psychological features with a characteristic of antiquity from Northern Malësia lead us to the conclusion that the song in Nikaj can be considered as the basic one of the Albanian variants and to occupy it as with other peoples in the Balkans, naturally considering also the songs with the characteristics of these peoples.²⁵

²¹ Кирил Пенушлиски, „Болен Дојчин“ во македонската народна поезија. Одбрани фолклористички трудови, кн. 2. Македонска книга, Скопје 1988, p. 338.

²² Lidija Stojanovic Lafazanofska, “Heroes – Anti-heroes,” in Kata Kulavkova (Ed.), **Black Arab as a Figure of Memory: Interpretations**, Vol. 3, European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics, Skopje, 2009, p. 198.

²³ Kata Kulavkova, “From a Black God to a Black Arab,” in Kata Kulavkova (Ed.), **Black Arab as a Figure of Memory: Interpretations**, Vol. 3, European Research Project for Poetics & Hermeneutics, Skopje, 2009, p. 40.

²⁴ Fatos Arapi, **Këngë të mocme shqiptare**, Naim Frashëri, Tiranë, 1986, p. 125.

²⁵ Sadri Fetiu, “Aspekte sampelërtare të këngës Gjergj Elez Alija,” **Kultura popullore**, nr. 2/1980.

The place of these events is more associated with Thessaloniki or Thessaloniki, and is also found in Buda in some cases. In Albanian songs the place of the events and the final battle is not determined where, and most often it is not named. However, there is an indirect location of the region: near some water or sand (sea, lake, river), because the rapist "emerges" from the water or sand. He causes a revolt in the sick hero on purpose, thereby encroaching on the honor of a woman, and, from a psychological point of view, it is precisely this anger that gives him a special impulse. And it is precisely this anti-hero who is killed by a sick and intelligent hero with supernatural force. Therefore, regardless of the title of the poem and the name of the anti-hero, to which people both he and the poem belong, it can be said that it is precisely this type of duel - hero-anti-hero - that represents the most sympathetic figures in folk poetry.²⁶

When it comes to the Albanian folk song that talks about this anti-hero, Bajloz, its historical context, although it can also lead to erroneous results, can take us very far in deep historical research. If we connect the historical context of this poem with the risk that always came to the Albanians from the sea, then the poetic theme of the poem can be extended to the enigmatic times of the Hellenic colonization's in the Adriatic Gulf of the Illyrians or in the Roman occupations of the Illyrian era. However, within the framework of ancient times, we did not take the Latin word "baiulus" from which the word of many poems from the Albanian folk literature "baloz" or "bailoz" originates, which is undoubtedly much older than the word "arap" which is certainly present in the Balkans even after the Ottoman occupation. It should also be said that the word "baloz" in its Latin form was also used in the Byzantine Empire in many parts of the central Balkans, while the name "bailo" was used to name the emperors and state representatives during the reign of the Angevins of Venice. In the Albanian poem, there is one detail that the poems about anti-heroes of the Balkan folk literature do not have, and that is that the external appearance of the Bailoz is not portrayed at all.

If we exclude some hyperbolic elements that are related to the character of Bailoz and his actions that are the result of his murder, then we can conclude that the Albanian legendary poem depicts his activities without major distortions and surprises, leaving unnecessary details.²⁷

Poetics

The composition of the poem follows a static system of repetition and variation, where themes build upon each other through descriptions, dialogues, characters, and the use of recurring locations and expressions. Epic repetition in these poems also establishes a kind of chronological order—through repetition, the chronology of events gains a logical coherence.

Poetics, on the one hand, reflects the feudal essence, understandings, and social relations of that era. On the other hand, it also deeply reveals the essence and social dynamics of Macedonian village life, including the transformations in the centuries-old narrative caused by the fall under Ottoman rule. This duality is easily discernible in the variants presented.

From the published materials, it is evident that the leitmotif of this artistic corpus is the patriotic idea of defending life.

The poems dealing with this theme can be grouped into four categories:

1. The first group includes all the poems centered on the original motif of Gjergj Elez Alija's battle against Bajloz or the Arab from the sea.
2. The second group contains poems that maintain the basic motif of conflict with the aforementioned antagonists, but feature different characters participating in the fight.

²⁶ Воислав Јаковски, *Баладите и баладните мотиви во македонската и во албанската народна песна*, ИНФ "Марко Цепенков", Скопје, 1980, p. 75.

²⁷ Кирил Пенушевски, *Крало Марко и Болен Дојчин*, Македонска книга, Скопје, 1986, p. 130.

3. The third group presents the anti-hero in other narratives, such as the tale of the ailing fiancée or poems about the kidnapped maiden.

4. The final group analyzes variants with mixed interethnic motifs.²⁸

Various interpretations have emerged concerning the origin of this poem. However, the defining traits of the anti-hero—his extraordinary strength, the mythic quality of his antagonism, etc.—suggest that the roots of this motif may not trace back to the Illyrian ethnocultural substratum. In contrast, its development during the medieval period appears linked to the medieval state of Arbëria (Albania), inferred from its limited interactions with the Byzantine administration. Through mythical elements, the people sought to differentiate their political identity from that of foreign powers, paving the way for the legendary victories of the Albanian national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti-Skënderbe.²⁹

Aspect	Bajloz (Albanian Epic)	Black Arab (Crni Arapin – South Slavic Epic)
Motif/Archetype	Monster or beast-like enemy; represents chaos or the foreign threat	Foreign invader; often presented as a black-skinned Other or demonic figure
Origin/Ethnicity	Often vaguely foreign (non-Albanian), sometimes mythological	Clearly racialized and ethnically Othered – Black Arab (Crni Arapin)
Character Traits	Giant, powerful, inhuman or semi-human; speaks less; brute force	Cunning, cruel, sexually aggressive; sometimes speaks in distorted language
Role in Narrative	Antagonist to the Albanian hero (e.g., Mujo, Halili); represents a challenge to overcome	Antagonist to the Slavic hero (e.g., Marko Kraljević); test of hero's strength and honor
Symbolic Meaning	Embodiment of non-Albanian threat, “the Other,” to be defeated to restore order	Racialized demonization of the Muslim and/or African Other
Cultural Function	Reinforces heroism, tribal unity, national identity	Reinforces Christian Slavic dominance, anti-Muslim and anti-Eastern sentiment
Defeat and Resolution	Slain or humiliated by the hero, often in a moral victory	Humiliated or executed by the hero; reaffirmation of divine or national order
Representation of Women	Often kidnaps women; challenge to honor of the tribe	Typically abducts women; linked with dishonor, rape motifs
Myth vs. History	More mythic than historical; blends folklore with metaphysical evil	Blends historical conflicts (e.g., Ottoman invasions) with racial mythology

²⁸ Qemal Haxhihasani, *Gjergj Elez Alija. Gjeneza, zhvillimi, tipologjia*, Çështje të folklorit shqiptar I, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, Tiranë, 1997, p.8.

²⁹ Qemal Haxhihasani, *Gjergj Elez Alija. Gjeneza, zhvillimi, tipologjia.* “Çështje të folklorit shqiptar I”. Instituti i kulturës popullore, Tiranë: 1997, p.31

The reception of Albanian and South Slavic antiheroes by historical and contemporary audiences reveals much about the cultural, social, and political contexts in which these figures circulated. These antiheroes—like the Bajloz (in Albanian epic) or the Crni Arapin / Black Arab (in South Slavic tradition)—fulfilled several social functions that evolved across time.

Historical Audiences

1. Moral Instruction (Didactic Function) - Negative models: Antiheroes were cautionary figures who embodied traits such as pride, cruelty, or betrayal. Their defeat by the hero served to reaffirm communal values like bravery, loyalty, and sacrifice. Example: The Black Arab, often portrayed as treacherous or cruel, was a symbolic contrast to the loyal and just Slavic hero. His defeat reinforced the superiority of the community's moral code.
2. National Identity and Otherness. These figures often represented the "Other"—ethnic, religious, or political enemies (e.g., Ottomans, Arabs, or foreign rulers). Albanian Bajloz figures, often portrayed as monstrous or alien, became symbols of foreign oppression, especially in the context of Ottoman rule. Defeating them symbolized resistance and cultural survival.
3. Catharsis. Through storytelling and singing, communities experienced emotional release—especially after trauma or war. Antiheroes allowed audiences to project fears, frustrations, or guilt onto a tangible enemy, and feel relief or justice when the hero triumphed.

Contemporary Audiences

1. National and Political Reflection. Modern interpretations often reinterpret antiheroes through nationalist or political lenses. Antiheroes are sometimes rehabilitated or recontextualized (e.g., seen as victims of propaganda or misunderstood outsiders), depending on current ideological narratives.
2. Moral Ambiguity. Contemporary audiences, influenced by postmodernism, often embrace complex, morally ambiguous characters. Instead of clear-cut evil, antiheroes might now represent inner conflict, trauma, or social critique—mirroring today's interest in psychological depth.
3. Artistic and Cultural Value. In literature, film, or theater, these figures are aestheticized as complex archetypes. They fulfill a symbolic role, challenging dominant ideologies and encouraging critical thinking about power, justice, and identity.

Conclusion

To analyze a literary phenomenon rooted in folk culture, one must first consider its specificity as a form of poetic thought—articulated at a particular level of social consciousness. This involves examining the underlying conflict of the theme, its origin and historical evolution, the characterization in both temporal depth and surface presentation, and ultimately, the aesthetic insights embodied within the narrative structure and artistic expression.

Closely tied to these analytical goals, and to the function this theme has fulfilled across various stages of the people's long historical journey and spiritual needs, it encompasses a broad ethical and philosophical practice, as well as linguistic and stylistic dimensions. These are artistically realized through various transformations and forms that reflect different poetic structures, shaped by elements specific to the epic, lyrical, and dramatic genres—through the interplay of motifs, character involvement, and their respective roles.

From all these analyses, we may conclude that heroes have served as sources of inspiration for the people, drawing admiration from every poetic layer. These figures, with their final reserves of strength, can defeat the symbolic monsters that represent the oppressive forces acting against them. This affirms the enduring belief that justice ultimately prevails, that even the impoverished—though seemingly weak—can triumph, and that moral virtue and social solidarity remain paramount. Despite the existence of numerous variants, the core purpose and thematic narrative of each epic poem remain consistent. Characters such as Crna Arapina and Bajloz repeatedly emerge as metaphorical representations of every enslaver, serving as narrative tools to empower the heroes and offer the people renewed strength to endure and persist.

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