

Ballads as Collective Memory: Historical Circumstances and National Features



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ABSTRACT

The role of folk songs in evoking memories is evident, on both a collective and individual level. Many songs, created for certain circumstances, even historical ones, remain layered in collective memory within folklore. Later, through the analysis of folk songs that shape our collective memory, in addition to shedding light on the circumstances that caused their creation, we manage to discover parts of our cultural identity, our national character and our unwritten history. Ballads and folk songs preserve our national features which were formed during certain circumstances, and which memories have brought to us today.

Based on this concept I will take into consideration an Albanian folk song that can be categorized as a historical ballad, which contains historical facts from an event that occurred during the Ottoman period in the Balkans. This folk song, named 'Fryni era, u çel taraba' [The wind blew, the fence opened], is very popular among Albanian-speaking areas in the Balkans. The Antigone motif, a sister that sacrifices herself for her brother, is what characterizes this ballad, and reveals other features of the community's national character such as honor, hospitality, revenge, etc. Its presence in Albanian-speaking oral tradition is very old and long, while also becoming very successful in theatre as dramas and ballets.

Based on qualitative inquiry, where data collection and data analysis techniques are combined to provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of why and how things happen, I will try to raise these issues: What is the role of folklore in preserving the memories of a community? What events should become folk songs or ballads to remain in collective memory? What 'feeds' it to stay alive?

The theoretical framework will be built on the works of authors Jan Vansina, Paul Thompson, Maurice Halbwachs, David C. Rubin, Joseph Von Hammer, Ahmet Qeriqi, Ndoc Selimi, Rrustem Berisha, Harry Hodgkinson.

KEYWORDS:

historical ballad, collective memory, history, Albania, the Balkans

Since the end of the twentieth century, memory has become a central concept around the research being conducted within the humanities and social sciences. The aim was to restore and review issues of past events and topics. The development of technology provided the potential of preserving data from the past and assisted in strengthening the role of memory by bringing the past back to reality. 'We enter when many things have already happened, over hundreds of thousands of years. And to better understand the many new things happening now, it is important to learn what took place before we were born', wrote Umberto Eco to his grandson in his letter 'Learn to Memorize'.¹

1 Eco, U. 'Letter to My Grandson: "Learn to Memorize"' <<https://www.wordeffects.com/notes-quotes-and-chatter/umberto-eco-letter-to-my-grandson>> [accessed 17 July 2018]



Traditions, folklore, oral history, folk music, and ballads play an important role in memory studies. The combination of historical studies and oral tradition, seen from the viewpoint of memory studies, brings new results and gives a different picture of this past, historical material. Oral traditions have served as banks of memory, as a milieu where past events have been preserved for centuries. Folklore gives us knowledge about our roots, tells us who we are, where we come from and who our ancestors were. Folklore, expressed, narrated, sung, inherited, carried, recorded, written, or in whatever form it had reached us in, is not only our heritage, but is also memory, evidence of a retrospective evaluation for our past, and a reflection of the present, of ourselves. Seeing folklore as collective, social, or cultural memory gives the possibility of illuminating its other sides, thus making it a valuable subject for memory studies. Analyzing and treating folk songs, narratives about heroes and events, from the aspect of documenting historical events, as well as national features and the human relations in them, will enable us to identify and understand a lot of information about history, as well as knowing ourselves by managing to construct our identity in the past (Dushi, 2021, p. 42).

While searching through the historical memory of a community, we discover many things about our past, about our history, as Paul Thompson wrote:

Through oral history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives: wars, social transformations like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power, or personal migration to a new community. Family history especially can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death. Through local history a village or town seeks meaning for its own changing character and newcomers can gain a sense of roots in personal historical knowledge. Through political and social history taught in schools children are helped to understand and accept, how the political and social system under which they live came about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution (Thompson, 2000, p. 2).

According to the concept of Halbwachs, unlike history that is understood through the comprehensiveness and synthesis of facts, the aim of a collective memory, is to compile the memories of individuals and groups of the past, seen from within a time period that does not exceed and often has to be much shorter than the average duration of a human life (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 83–87). Consequently, a ballad, a folk song, can easily serve and fulfill the role of a collective memory. Being part of the spiritual culture of a group or community, oral folk creations layered in a groups memory build the collective memory of a given community (Climo & Cattell, 2002). Author David Rubin, who deals with the cognitive psychology of oral traditions in memory, addressed this relationship in his study, saying: ‘Songs, stories, and poems are kept in stable form for centuries without the use of writing; literate observer has trouble remembering what happened yesterday without notes’ (Rubin, 1995, p. 3). Although he points out that the big role in storing memory through folk tradition is the form, specifically *the rhyme*, which keeps the verbal verses connected. It helps memory to be

transmitted easily. Identifiable rhymes, epic songs, and ballads, based on their verses and rhymes, are oral genres that are easily transmitted and are preserved in their most durable form (Rubin, 1995, pp. 10–12).

What events should become folk songs or ballads to remain in collective memory? What ‘feeds’ it to stay alive? In addition to rhyme, another factor that helps memory is *narration*. The widespread use of words in narration permits the narrator to timely recall and produce narratives about the events. Images, voice, formulas in epic, verses, etc., are the ingredients of this oral tradition which has caused these types (?) to remain in memory. But it is not only the shape that keeps a memory alive. Vansina pointed out that a *message* saves the memory (Vansina, 1985, p. 3). Consequently, only folk songs that carry a message are preserved, others are extinguished because it is the message which gives continuity to the tradition. And this message from the past, if it corresponds with the present, will resonate even to this day. Messages are social products and cultural products. They are also historical products, so through decomposing of folk songs and ballads we can discover and understand our past. Memory preserved in the oral tradition is proof of our cultural heritage which in new contexts reveals new data about our time and ourselves.

These concepts are materialized by taking into consideration an Albanian folk ballad, which draws on facts from a historical event that occurred during the Ottoman period in the Balkans. The Antigone motif, in which a sister sacrifices herself for her brother while taking a role in the family (and society), is what characterizes this song. It reveals other features of the community’s national character such as honor, hospitality, revenge, etc. The presence of this ballad in Albanian oral tradition is very old and long and was also reshaped and reconstructed in other artistic formats, becoming successful in literature and in theatre dramas and ballets.

THE BALLAD: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE PLOT

‘Fryni era, u çel taraba’ [The wind blew, the fence opened] is a historical Albanian folk ballad, which tells of event that happened during the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. This folk song has historical background yet is still considered a ballad and not a historical epic song, based on some of the characteristics we know of the ballad. A ballad is classified, by its concentration on an episode; it is a song that tells a story; focuses on a single incident; offers background explanatory details sparingly; often begins in the *medias res*; easily transcends events; allows free use of dialogue and repetition; emphasizes action instead of reflection; is related to an idea which is often more durable than the text itself; recounts the story impersonally (objective), without an author or editorial comments (Richmond, 1989; Whiting, 1955, cited in Rubin, 1995, pp. 257–298). Additionally, the absence of the beginning of the event, which is a usual characteristic of historical songs, places this song in the ballad category. This is furthered by the elements of its structure, where myth, mysteriousness, taboos, and deep conflicts build the literary unit (Berisha, 2006, p. 22).

The event of the ballad begins during which two Albanian brothers, Halili and Musa, have come for dinner with their sister’s family after being invited to do so





by her husband. Suddenly they find themselves surrounded by the Sultan's soldiers. Betrayed by their host, (their sister's husband), Bejtash Sylja, they are captured by the soldiers of Avdi Aga (the Sultan's deputy) who were looking for them. As they leave the house, they curse their sister Hajrije, thinking that she planned this ambush accomplished by false hospitality. While Hajrije is trapped in ignorance, she also feels betrayed by her husband who betrayed their guests, her brothers. Feeling obliged to take revenge for her brothers, she and her son kill her husband.

This plot of this ballad has been passed down to this day. Although we find versions of oral texts in which contain longer forms, and are part of the Albanian folklore collections, this version, which is quoted today by singers and folk-singers alike, is what we see below.²

Fryni era u çel taraba

Fryni era u çel taraba:
 Çou Halili se Avdi aga,
 me treqind sejmënë përmapa,
 Musa I vogël u çu në kamë
 Kërkon armët -ku i kam lanë?!
 Na i ka mshehun miku mramë;
 E paska mendjen me na zanë.
 'M'paç në qafë ti mori motër,
 që m'rrejtje më prune në Shkodër
 Ty mos t'leftë kurrë djalë në votër!
 -Mos m'left' djalë e mos m'left' cikë,
 Këtë punë motra s'e kam ditë...
 Shkoi një javë e shkuan pesë ditë,
 Preu të shoqin me gjithë të birtë.
 'Kur ja vuna thikën burrit,
 Sikur më dulën vllëznit prej vorrit!
 Kur ja vuna thikën djalit,
 Sikur më dulën sytë e ballit!

The wind blew, the fence opened

The wind blew, the fence opened:
 Get up Halil here's Avdi aga,
 With his three hundred soldiers,
 Little Musta stood up fast
 Seeking weapons — where I had left?!
 Our host hid'em last night;
 With us captured in his mind.
 'Damned you be my lying sister
 For bringing me down in Shkodra.
 Wish your hearth remains sonless!
 -I want no boy nor a girl,
 Your sis knew nothing of treason...
 A week has passed and other five days,
 She killed the husband and a son,
 'When I put knife on my husband,
 As if my brothers came out of grave!
 When I put knife on my son,
 As if my eyes came out of my forehead!

Variants of this ballad are published in many books containing oral text materials, which proves that as it has lived a long life amongst Albanian communities and has been recorded many times by folklore collectors. It was recorded by Karl Gurakuqi and Filip Fishta, in their first volume of the collections known as 'Visaret i Kombit' (1935), it was categorized as a 'brave song' with two variants titled 'Musta e Halili' (83 verses) and 'Fryni era u çil taraba' (44 verses) (Gurakuqi & Fishta, 1935, pp. 29-34). Seven decades later in the volumes of 'Historical Folk Songs', published by the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina (2007) there is evidence from five variants, with comparisons from 65 to 260 lines (Berisha, et al., 2007, pp. 200-229).

2 Fryni era u cel taraba — Fitnete Rexha <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5CiLEFrV-GY>> [accessed 22.07.2018].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NARRATED EVENT

Tracing the historical context of this ballad, illuminates other facts, through which we gain new information about the position of Albanians during that time, as well as about their national features (Qeriqi, 2005, pp. 5-49). A tragic event which occurred in Istanbul on 20 September 1730, provides possible context and background for this ballad. According to historical evidence, on the mentioned date, during the rule of Sultan Ahmed the third (reigned 1703 — 1730), Janissaries³ had organized an uprising against the Sultan because of his crime of invading the imperial system and levying high taxes against the people, worsening the already bad living circumstances of the poor (Hammer, 1979, pp. 5-38, cited in Qeriqi, 2005). The leader of the rebellion was the janissary called Halil (Alli, Khalil) Patrona, of Albanian origin. According to this source:

‘Sultan Achmet had become unpopular by reason of the excessive pomp and costly luxury in which he and his principal officers indulged; and on the 20th of September, 1730, a mutinous riot of seventeen Janissaries, led by the Albanian Patrona Khalil, was encouraged by the citizens as well as by the soldiery, till it swelled into the insurrection, before which the Sultan quailed, and gave up the throne’ (Creasy, 1854-56, p. 155).

Being one of the most influential individuals amongst the janissaries at the time, Halil had been able to gather a group of other unhappy janissaries and thus organized this great uprising which caused damage to the Ottoman Empire. His cousin, Musa Beshi, and many other janissaries were with him. Evidence states that the Sultan ordered the assassination of 10,000 janissaries, however 5,000 of them managed to flee and hide in Albania and Macedonia, which were their countries of origin (Hammer, 1979, cited in Qeriqi, 2005, p. 22).

According to written sources, Halil, together with Musa and 7000 others, were executed in Istanbul (Creasy, 1854-56, p. 159). In some versions of the ballad, Halil and Musa were executed in Albania, while other authors say the event occurred in Istanbul where Hajrije (the sister), and her husband lived and hosted the brothers for dinner.⁴ Regardless of where the event took place, in Istanbul or in Albania, the ballad about this event has been preserved and has survived forgetting. The historic character Patrona has existed and acted heroically, and the echo of his works are known to this day, thanks to the ballad that saved this national memory.

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- 3 Janissaries — were elite units that formed the Ottoman Sultan’s household troops, bodyguards. These formations were created from boys (usually between the ages of 6 and 14) of non-Muslim origin, who were then taken from their parents and given to Turkish families in the provinces to learn Turkish language and customs, and the rules of Islam. This was the taking (enslaving) of non-Muslim boys, notably Anatolian and Balkan Christians, because it was not permissible to enslave a Muslim.
- 4 Ndoc Selimi, ‘Në gjurmë të kangës popullore “Fryni era u çel Taraba”’, <<http://www.radiandradi.com/ne-gjurmte-kanges-popullore-fryni-era-e-u-cel-taraba-nga-ndoc-selimi/>> [accessed 27.07.2018]



Photo of Halil (Alli) Patrona from Charles Perry collection in Travelogues.⁵

BALLAD IN THE PRESERVATION OF NATIONAL MEMORY

But how has this song been transmitted and survived throughout the centuries? This sung of event was supposedly brought from Istanbul by Albanian dervishes of the Bektashi order,⁶ who sung about the actions of the heroes of their time. It is known

⁵ Photo of Halil (Alli) Patrona from Charles Perry collection, in Travelogues: <http://eng.travelogues.gr/item.php?view=33091> [accessed:15.01.2019]

⁶ According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* the Bektashi order is one of many Sufi orders within orthodox Sunni Islam, which acquired definitive form in the 16th century in Anatolia (Turkey) and spread to the Ottoman Balkans, particularly Albania. The Bektashis acquired political importance in the 15th century, when the order dominated the Janissaries, an elite Ottoman military corps recruited from Christian lands. Like many Sufis, the Bektashis were quite lax in observing daily Muslim laws, and women as well as men took part in ritual wine drinking and dancing during devotional ceremonies. The Bektashis in the Balkans adapted



that the dervishes during the Ottoman Empire's battles played songs to keep up the soldiers' moral. The songs then were sung by Albanian rhapsodists, who while singing and transmitting the story orally, modified and adapted the song according to the local area's circumstances. As Morin says, traditions are fuzzy objects and never completely copied without a share of reinvention. They are traditional only to the extent that they manage to spread to remote times and places (Morin, 2016, p. 5). The mode of transmission, being based only on the memory of the rhapsody and community, without the possibility of written documentation, has certainly given rise to major modifications of oral texts. As Honko had pointed out for epics, we have only come to know their final forms, the previous unwritten versions are impossible to know since we don't have them recorded (Honko, 1998, p. 18). Therefore, adaptations to the circumstances of creation have been more evident. The location may change and minor actions taken by characters may be missed or increased, depending on their considered relevancy. However, the pillar of moral principles established within the ballad remain unchanged. Human dignity, a sister's love for brothers, or even basic principles that denigrate betrayal remain the values that give life to a ballad and increase its chances for survival. The ballad itself may have many versions, where minor data differs, but the core is unchangeable — a sister's revenge on behalf of her brothers is the main theme which characterizes this ballad. This theme has kept it alive. As such, it continues to transmit social messages which remind us of the traditional norms within the Albanian family and society. Besides the historical thematic ballad, it can also be characterized as a ballad for family relationships, or even a ballad about the role of woman in the family and society. The act of a sister who destroys her family to take revenge on behalf of her brothers, is considered a heroic action, and preserves this ballad within folklore.

Some of the data taken from Ottoman sources is very close to the story which is described in the ballad 'Fryni era u çel taraba', which is suspected of having undergone modifications and adaptation in many variants to accommodate local features. Edith Durham states that the most ominous and dramatic ballad about the dead brother is from an Albanian version (Durham, 2009, p. 85). It managed to preserve the names of Albanian heroes, along with the act of decapitation, making them the brothers of the Hajrije, who take revenge for their brother's execution. The pursuit of the janissaries from Istanbul is confirmed by history while the family's actions are preserved only in folklore.

The event within the ballad, in this case, can be confirmed by testimonies from that period, but the preservation of this event through folklore makes the ballad an uncertain historical source. 'Fryni era u çel taraba', which is preserved in Albanian folklore, is a reliable source for the recognition and reconstruction of collec-

such Christian practices as the ritual sharing of bread and the confession of sins. Bektashi mystical writings made a rich contribution to Sufi poetry. After 1925, when all Sufi orders were dissolved in Turkey, the Bektashi leadership shifted to Albania. With the banning of religion in Albania in 1967, Bektashi devotions were carried on by communities in Turkey, Albanian regions of the Balkans, and the United States. Bektashi traditions have been revived in Albania since the fall of communism there in the early 1990s (Tesch, 2015).



tive memory, as well as a community's national features. The tradition of hospitality, well-known by Albanians, was abused by the brother-in-law when he captured his guests in the ballad. Halil and Musa, two brave men who were pursued by Avdi aga were betrayed by their brother-in-law Bejtash Syla. As a collaborator with Ottomans, he provided services to them by spying on his brothers-in law, who were enemies of the Ottomans. Bejtash Syla accepts his wife's punishment for his double betrayal: to the nation and to the guests. The offence being so great, that his punishment could only be fatal. Excessive punishment for a betrayal of such a tragic, massive scale, corresponds to the norms of Albanian tradition, where betrayal of a guest is a punishable act, which is codified by the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini⁷. From the canonical code we cite: 'Po t'a vûni kush mikun në lojë a t'a shau, ti do t'a mkâmbish nderen e mikut me rrezik të jetës s'ate' / [If someone offends or disavows a friend in your home, you have to protect him, even if the act of his protection risks your life!] (Gjeçovi, 1985, p. 112). Breaking this code implied punishment and condemnation by the community, which in this case, Bejtash Syla received from his wife. The sister's act of brutal revenge, killing her husband and son, is considered a heroic act based on traditional Albanian rules, which implies that the sister has fulfilled her obligation to restore the honor and dignity of their brothers and the nation. She also killed her son because he was the son of a traitor. Antigone's motif, known by Greek antiquity literature, whereby the sister takes revenge for her brother or brothers, is found in Albanian folklore too, where many songs from Albanian folklore are based on this theme. Furthermore, this ballad was traditionally sung in Albanian weddings. It marked the moment when the couple met or were united. It was sung as a message to the groom that in case of national or family betrayal he will receive punishment from his spouse.⁸

As Harry Hodgkinson says 'nowhere better than in the Balkans can the motive of Antigone from Sophocles' tragedy be understood, the sister from Greek mythology who exhumed her brother to preserve his dignity and that of the family. Only the mountain woman has her brother before all! (Hodgkinson, 1999, p. 11). This English author, who deals with Skënderbeu's biography which is based on a broad socio-cultural analysis of the family and Albanian society, says that in the Balkans more than in any other culture, the sister-brother relationship is built on the foundations of sublime love, and mutual honor and respect. It is perhaps the very patriarchal heritage of Albanian society that gives the sister the place of being protected by her brother, as well as the brother the place of being supported by his sister. Another

7 Canon of Lekë Dukagjini is a set of traditional Albanian laws codified in the 15th century. It regulated life of Albanian family and community in North Albanian and Kosovo, for centuries. Besa (the promise), honor and revenge were among the main norms on which Albanian society operated under the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini. Originally was oral, until 19th century when was collected and written by the Catholic priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi, who managed to publish it in a written form.

8 Selimi, N. 'Në gjurmë të kangës popullore "Fryni era u çel Taraba"', <<http://www.radian-dradi.com/ne-gjurmte-kanges-popullore-fryni-era-e-u-cel-taraba-nga-ndoc-selimi/>> [accessed 27.07.2018].



author tries to find the origin of this love through the attitudes of Albanian traditions toward women, whom he described as a ‘sack for the house’ (Gjeçovi, 1985, p. 63), which means that her body (her womb) has only served to increase the seed of the man, without having rights over her child or the inheritance, because the Albanian woman according to traditional norms is considered to have no biological connection to her husband. In this context, she does not belong to her husband’s family, but to her family of origin, namely her father’s family, where her brother remains her strongest connection, sharing same blood. Therefore, even incest among Albanians is a prohibition codified by norms and is therefore a punishable act. (Hodgkinson, 1999, pp. 20–23).

The sister’s love for her brother to the point of self-sacrifice, denying both her husband and children to protect her brother’s life, is present in many other Albanian folk ballads and songs. Women have also become the subject of research and study by non-Albanian authors who have dealt with this theme, thus explaining other archaic phenomena within Albanian society such as vendettas, blood feuds, or even sworn female virgins who sacrifice their life plans for their brother’s family (Young, 2001, pp. 55–69).

This ballad, which emphasizes a historical moment alongside traditional national features, is widespread throughout Albanian-speaking folklore. Many versions of this song are found amongst Albanian communities living in different Balkan countries. It has also been adapted (1949) into a very successful drama based on this song, titled ‘Halil & Hajrije’. It was performed in Kosovo by a theatre troupe in Gjakova,⁹ but also as a ballet that was performed by the opera theater and ballet troupe in Tirana in 1963,¹⁰ and more recently in 2014.¹¹

As seen from the longevity of this ballad in the cultural life of Albanians, and by the variety of performance adaptations, it is clear this ballad holds national value. The act of national betrayal, as great an offence as the betrayal of a guest, continues to be considered an inexcusable act within traditional Albanian society. Referring to these offences and following punishments as codes, and by reminding the community of them through folklore and other artistic forms, expresses the need and desire to refresh the collective memory on the national features of society. Keeping and saving this ballad in our cultural memory helps us to recognize our historical past. Ballads and folklore can prove historical facts, as well as help us recognize and identify our collective self, whereby we can construct our past. Ballads cannot serve as a primary source of history, but they can preserve our historical and national memory.

9 Hadi Shehu, Halili e Hajrija, wmv, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp6n4GUaufA>> (posted 25, Feb.2010) [accessed 20.01.2019].

10 Baleti ‘Halili dhe Hajria’, 13 janar të vitit 1963, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC8hz4TQ688>> (posted 17.Feb.2017), [accessed 20.01.2019].

11 Halili e Hajrija — Balet në tre akte, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HipScbQOzvk>> (posted 04.06.2016) [accessed 20.01.2019].



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