

An ethnomusical analysis: Albanian highland songs

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DOI 10.12975/rastmd.20221026 Submitted March 28, 2022 Accepted June 21, 2022

Abstract

This descriptive and analytical work examines songs called highland songs or songs of the mountaineers. These are folkloric creations, which have expanded within many but not all areas where the Balkan Albanian people exist. They are mostly practiced in the Northern folkloric zones, and are unique, conditional or determined through the specifics of the methods and how they are practiced. Throughout this research, the main features and characteristics of the highland songs or songs of the mountaineers will be explained and discussed. Clarification and arguments regarding the theoretical plan and several concrete descriptive analyses will be conducted, which will be elaborated so as to support the outcomes. The purpose of this article is to present clearly a complete overview of the depth and breadth of this unique Albanian folkloric art. What piqued the interest of the authors to research this art, was the discovery of the fact that the poetic styles of these songs are clearly noticeable and unique compared to the other types of typical Albanian traditional folk songs. Throughout these songs, a way of singing is noticed, which is completely different and unrepeatable in the other types of historical songs; the poetic structure is shortened; poems have reduced verses; and they lack pronunciation and comprehension of the poetic text in many cases.

Keywords

fact, historical epics, highland songs, legendary epics, music folklore

Introduction

Albanian folklore is very rich in genre and different types of folk culture. Among them are the creations of the Albanian oral epic, which occupies its own special place. Historical epic songs, represent a special type of Albanian epic song in general, which like legendary songs, possess special characteristics and an exclusive phenomenon within the narrative or poetic narrative. Based on the nature of this story, the specific way poetic thought is expressed, Albanian folklore has already accepted that the epic in general consists of two major divisions or two separate types of folklore, which are legendary epics and historical epics.

Albanian historical epics are divided into five types or main models. They are: songs that talk about the War of Fushë Kosovë (The field of Kosovo); Arbëresh songs; songs

of Northern folklore; songs of the folklore of the South; and the mountaineer songs or, as they are popularly known as highland songs.

The specific subject of this paper, will focus particularly on the type of mauntaineer or highland songs. Modeling, reliance on tradition, lifestyles and performance, composition typology, structure practiced stylistic tools are the parameters that are presented in this writing. The highland songs are folk creations which are not practiced throughout all Balkan Albanian territories. They are mostly practiced in the northern folklore areas, which are in the higher mountainous regions north of Shkodra, Dukagjini and Malesia e Madhe in Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. Each area has a unique style. conditions or is determined by the specifics in their way of practice. Mountaineer songs, like ancient songs, are sung in a very special kind of way, therefore curiosity was piqued by the authors to study and analyze these songs.

What do highland songs represent and what is their range of practice?

The different types of historical Albanian epic songs are: The battle of Kosovo Songs (1389), the Arbëresh historical model of songs, folklore songs of the North region, folklore songs of the South region, and the dear unique highland or mountaineer songs if the North. In order to describe the songs. the authors founded their discovery based on the fact that the poetic style of the highland songs is completely distinctive and unique compared to other types of typical historical traditional Albanian songs. Set apart from all others, this type of song could be noticeable by; the way it is sung, which is entirely different and generally unrepeatable in every other type of historical song; the poetic structure, which is a brief poem or has reduced number of verses; and the lack of enunciation and clarity of the poetic text in many cases. Speaking on this type of song, Rexhep Munishi expressed, "we understand a specific way of singing of the mountaineers on different occasions, a distinctive way of singing that differs from other types of vocal music of the mountaineers themselves, but also of the Albanians in general." This proclamation clarifies this type of song's identity, which negates any other wrong usage or definition of the highlander or mountaineering songs meanings. Based on the claim of Savro Skendit, according to Ernest Koligi, in particular, it is written that "Heroic Albanian songs of the North mountaineers are called Highlander or the songs of mountaineers, but a general term of them would be bravery songs."2

Generally, Highland songs are percieved as a special type of historical song, however, even though songs of such kind are lyrical in nature, the lyrics are not the main focus, but the poetry is. These poems mainly have a social function, they determine the unique features of these creations, and highlight other elements such as: the type and the structure of the sung verses, imposed musical forms, textual and rhythmic structures, textual and musical variants, etc.... In other words, the advantageous role that the musical part plays on these creations is accepted, yet, as how it happens in all folkloric creation that is truly naturally syncretic, the various verses or proclamations, even though they can not be defined, in the same sense that without them, these songs can not be conceived with the function they actually performed in their folk life.



Picture 1. Batushë -Gjakova, 19843



Picture 2. Batushë -Gjakova, 19844

¹ Rexhep Munishi, Këngët malësorçe shqiptare (Albanian Highland Songs), Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 1987, p. 15.

² Stavro Skendi, Poezia epike gojore e shqiptarëve dhe e sllavëve të jugut(Epic oral poetry of Albanians and southern Slavs) Instituti i Dialogut dhe i Komunikimit, Tiranë, p. 124.

³ Rexhep Munishi, Këngët malësorçe shqiptare (Albanian Highland Songs), Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 1987, p. 70.

⁴Rexhep Munishi, Këngët malësorçe shqiptare (Albanian Highland Songs), Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 1987, p. 291.



Picture 3. Batushë -Gjakova, 1984⁵

This claim derives from the fact that, after all, these creations have present and fused beween them two of the ancient historical constituents of syncretism.⁶ In this type of melded song, is the significantly harmonized practical utilitarian function with their traditional dress and artistic presentation, through the folklore subject. In this coexistence, it is realized the very existence, practice, and function of these folk creations.

The above-mentioned ethnomusicologist, R. Munishi, one of the most known connoisseurs of these songs, the only one to date who has realized a monographic work for them, rightly defines this type of song practiced only by mountaineers, who "compared to the inhabitants of the other valley regions, are characterized with distinctive features not only with other neighboring nations of Balkans, but among the Albanian population as well." However, his claim that highland songs "do not have texts that elaborate any topic, and they are not even lyrical elaborations"8 does not seem to be firmly founded. The authors express this because even these songs have their communicative function. An acceptance of the function of

these folkloric creations is not simply about the performer of such creations, but also about the receiver or the recipient as well. A similar phenomenon occurs with proverbs. They would be meaningless, which means that they would not perform any other function if we do not see them in a certain conversational context in the composition. In reference to proverbs, A. Xhagolli said that it "is always practiced in a certain context. Therefore, it is a component of a certain narrative that in the most cases is used as a conclusion of a conversation. From this it is discovered that from behind the proverb the meaning of the speaker and the situation is expressed."9

Specifically, it is on this basis that proverbs are defined as one of the types of Albanian folk prose. 10 Similarly, this same phenomena occurs also in the case of highland songs, therefore, the same judgement can be applied. If the highland songs would not have expressed anything, even just a simple message, their mission and function would be indefinable. The fact that such creations. even though in the best case, do not have in their composition genuine poetry, with all the dimensions and structure of a folk poem, are understood by the listener, means that they convey a certain message. The authors of this article believe that it is precisely this intercommunication or understanding between the act of communication and that of the reception that is the main factor which gives these creations an epic or lyric nature, in general. Regardless of size of the poetic text in these creations, everything is within the aspirations of creation, entered in the folkloric flow which means that it is recognizable or is in the consciousness of every receptor. The message that these songs convey is comprehensible and complete in the context previously known or implied creativity. Moreover, R. Munishi himself,

⁵ Rexhep Munishi, *Këngët malësorçe shqiptare (Albanian Highland Songs)*, Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës, Prishtinë, 1987, p. 291.

⁶ Agron Xhagolli, Aspekte të sinkretizmit në vlerat folklorike të festivalit, "Probleme të zhvillimit të folklorit bashkëkohor" (Aspects of syncretism in the festival's folk values, "Problems of the development of contemporary folklore"), Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, Tiranë, 1980, pp. 85 - 88.

⁷ Rexhep Munishi, op. cit., p. 16.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁹ Agron Xhagolli, Etnologjia dhe folklori shqiptar (Ethnology and Albanian folklore), Universiteti "Ismail Qemali", Vlorë, 2007, p. 194.

¹⁰ Agron Xhagolli, Klasifikimi i prozës popullore shqiptare (Classification of Albanian folk prose), Botimet Dudaj, Tiranë, 2001, pp. 72 - 73.

speaking of the factors that influenced the preservation of highland songs, suggests a claim of this nature: "In such circumstances, in addition to the memory of the important historical events of the people, the war and its resistance, the memory of the songs that could have played a major role in those events, has been raised to a cult level."

In this sense, it would be safe to say that there is room to separate highland songs into epic and lyric creations, depending on the context of their practice, i.e. the function they perform. Of course, the way these are examined will take into consideration only those creations that appear to be a historical epic type. Meaning, the highland songs are able to be dividend into epic and lyrical.

The practice of these songs in the Albanian lands does not have widespread coverage. They are practiced in specific regions, mainly in the alpine areas of Northern Albania, as a means of communication, conveying messages through folkloric creation, i.e. of a syncretic nature. In general, researchers, on the bases of concrete field research, have identified these Northern Albanian regions as the areas where these songs have been practiced: Plave and Gucia, Trieshi and Gruda, Malësia e Madhe and the Malësia of Gjakova districts, Dukagjini, Rugova, Kukës and the Has district, the plains of Dukagjin, Shala e Bajgorës, Podrimje, the Karadak district, and some parts Gollak. 12 In addition to these most prominent regions, researchers have also discovered other areas of prctice, such as: the villages in Mirditë, Pukë, Bregu i Matës in Lezhë, Anamal, Krajë, Tivar, Shtoj and others, which testifies that these songs are practiced on larger scale throughout these recently identified places than what has been in the past. Scholars link such a phenomenon to the fact that they prove to be "a hidden reflex of an ancient singing tradition."13



Figure 1. Ethnic map of Albania 2011 (2002 census)¹⁴

Furthermore, there is some evidence of interest, which states that "songs sung loudly while holding a finger in the ear, with a communicative and signaling function, are still present within the Arbëresh in Southern Italy."15 This is mentioned with interest because the existence of practice by the Arbëresh of Italy convincingly documents the early and widespread existence of these creations among the Albanians. It remains to be seen if the above mentioned evidence of this way of singing is characteristic for all Arbëresh people or only for certain communities of them, generally an origin of displacement from their ancestors from the Northern Albanian regions. If we are dealing with a practice in all areas of the Arbëresh, then this phenomenon should accept a more general Albanian plan, which has faded over time and has fallen out of practice.

Actually, there are a variety of names for highland songs, depending on the region where they are practice, the conception of these songs, their function, and the way

¹¹ Rerxhep Munishi, op. cit., p. 89.

¹² Ibid. p. 20 - 21.

¹³ Ibid. p. 22.

¹⁴ https://www.arcgis.com/apps/View/index. html?appid=f918393918f64194b42123a738d77320, dt.12.05.2022¹² lbid. p. 20 - 21.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 84.

they are sung. Among some of them are those which more clearly represent these folkloric creations, such as: "mountaineer songs", "devotion songs", "thermal songs", "asqerçe songs", and singing with the finger placed in the ear songs. Regardless of the names by different nature, the fact is, they all by diversity make one doubt their unity, but the truth is that in all these situations they represent the same type of song. Their commonality lies precisely on their function. Therefore, the next section will discuss more concretely the function the songs have performed during this folklore circulation.

Functions of Highland Songs

Ethnomusicologists have argued that generally different people, in certain periods of their social development, have operated differently in ways of producing intercommunication between each other. For example, these ways range from shouting. chanting, organizing musical tonies, singing specific songs, as well as intentionally selected musical instruments. For highland songs, it is generally accepted that their main function has been for signaling and communicative purposes, since the beginning of thier practice. Focusing only on the relevant creations of the historical epic, it can be said that through them a certain message has been conveyed. R. Munishi agrees with this, by stating, "In order to preserve the context of the category of singing, the traditional creator has not changed all the elements of this type of creation. Thus, although the existing melody has given a new text time, a new theme, it is still related to the essential purpose of these songs, which is one that communicative and signaling."17 To concretise his opinion, the same researcher analyzes the song "Words for wire" and concludes that "this song not only uses the characteristic melody, but also with the textual content proves directly that such a song serves as a signaling tool for remote communication in order to transmit the news of danger from the enemy."18

Regarding the general function of the highland songs, they have been fully explained by the researcher R. Munishi as he laid down the functional foundation of these songs. He has found that these songs have carried or performed various functions from time to time. Besides this, he focuses on the dismantling of the function of carrying out the conditions for war, but also in the forms of military activity outside of those conditions, from the Middle Ages until the National Liberation War in 1944. Specifically, he dismantles these allegations through explanations or declarations on the subjects with which he has worked in the field. Among other things, Munishi claims that highland songs were not only sung to increase doses of courage and bravery for those leaving for war, but also to keep alive the past of their ancestors. Hence, he concludes that "such a song was not just a simple artistic creation, it was raised to the level of a symbol and a magical formula, which made its role and social function idealized."20

Such identification of the function of the highland songs prove there is a merging of two functions; a practical utilitarian function paired with artistic value, which considers the latter in the totality of the content components of the songs themselves. But this fusion and harmonization has not always existed. Some researches have suggested that initially, in the beginning, "indeed in that first phase of calls it was utilitarian, signaling and communicative. This was a stage when these had not yet been songs."19 But despite the theoretical discussions, for the purpose of this paper, the main point is that these creations of Albanian historical epics have come with a genuine and obvious practical-utilitarian function, fused, harmonized and have artistic value. Especially here, in a more prominent way, one can see the qualitative value in arranging a special type of Albanian historical song like this in general.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 16 - 19.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 24.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 27.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 29.

But this researcher does not stop there. In the following he explains what really happened to the function of these songs during changes of historical periods. "By becoming an inventive object of a creative subject, in broad social manifestations, it gains new functional impulses. The rapport between the creative subject and the interpretation, on the one hand, and the social environment as a non-passive but selective receptor, on the other hand, as well as the object (song) itself, form new relations. In the last phase, were we find ourselves today, mountain songs, their social function, in the most general points, coincides with other traditional creations in general, but they are also unique, depending on the environment and the moment of interpretation."21

Naturally, Munishi sees highland songs having other functions as well. These creations are practiced on special occasions and moments such as a wedding, while shepherding, and in gatherings of various nature. Since the focus only on songs of historical epic has been undertaken thus far, there will not be an emphasis on analyzing concrete cases and specifics of the practice in terms of their lyrical expression. This is mentioned simply to conclude that in gjeneral, highland songs sung at Albanians social functions have changed during the historical developments of Albanian society, while becoming, at the same time, an integral and interesting part of the spiritual culture of the Albanian people, presenting specific and expressive elements, even of a lyrical nature.

While regarding the nature of highland songs from the historical epic, their consecrative character can be emphasize in a special way. The greatest importance is the distinctive feature in the historical epic highland songs, that will be addressed a little more extensively in the next section, as it describes the spirit they carry and convey, as well as the ways that make this feature functional, which is a very important part of these songs.

The Spirit of Contemplation That Pervades Highland songs

Generally all of the scholars who have studied Highland songs have expressed the opinion that their initial purpose served for calling and chanting for different cases and circumstances. Thus, R. Munishi states that "While observing the process of transformation of signaling and communicative elements, which are still present today wraped in the melodic element, we base our description regarding the origin of these songs in the hypothesis, that highland songs originated exactly through signals as a means of communication in their local area." The description was later changed to say that highland songs, were raised to a level of being a traditional cult. Remote communication has played various parts, for meetings, announcements, to announce danger or a disaster, etc.... Since the Albanian people have experienced their historical past through numerous and frequent battles against their invaders and aggressors, it has been necessary to be united, at least within certain communities, so as to face these situations of danger together. But with the living conditions as they were in the mountainous areas of Northern Albania, and usually the towers were placed at a great distance from one other, it was necessary to select effective ways of communication between those distances. Consequently, the battle cry was a necessary means of communication in those areas where the Albanian highlander lived. The battle cry was a call to announce that someone was approaching or something was happening, so precautions could be taken. Certain actions had to be taken, men had to gather in order to prepare for what was ahead, mainly in facing an invading enemy. The real living conditions of the Albanian highlander was both beautiful and yet scary in nature. The terrain has high and steep mountains, deep gorges and echos that resound throughout the area. This is an organic setting that allowed intercommunication for which the residents depended on for living in such

²¹ Ibid.

mountainous areas. R. Munishi correctly emphasizes that the exact formation of this nature influenced the cultural temperament and natural character of the highlander, especially, the way highland songs are sung. Based on this observation Munishi makes a connection in the fact that "highland songs represent a very faithful interconnection

between the features of the songs and the human personality, with the character of the people who sing them."²² Furthermore, he states that "This accord, although it can be considered as an objective reflection of the natural conditions, is more the result of a transferrance of human psychology to art."

Highland songs ilustrated with notes





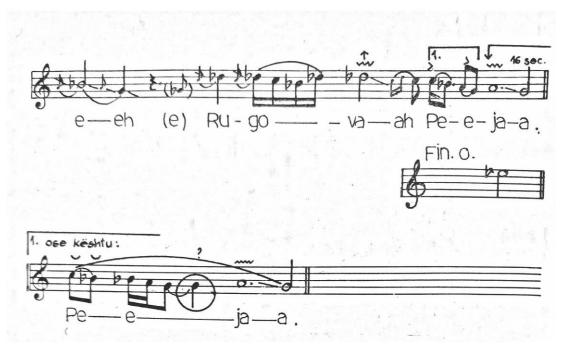
Notation 1. First song

Table 1. N'Fush' t'Kosov's u mledh' telalli²³ (Representatives are gathered in the Field of Kosovo)

Albanian	English			
(o) O n'Fushë t'Ko-so-ves u mledh'o o te e la-lli o jao se e ve e te e tho o-to u	Oh Representatives are gathered in the Field of Kosovo Oh wait I'm coming to tell them			
oj se na a-me po ba aj-no u e jo se e ve te e tho o-to u oj se na a-me po a ba aj-ne e e jo u.	Oh we're doing a great job Oh I'm coming myself and tell them Oh we're doing a great job.			
N'Fush' t'Kosov's u mledh' telalli vetë e thon' se na u bâ nami, vetë e thon' se na u bâ nami.	Oh Representatives are gathered in the Field of Kosovo Are talking about victory Are talking about victory.			

²³ Rexhep Munishi, "Këngët malësorçe shqiptare", Prishtinë, 1987, P. 209-210.





Notation 2. Second song

Table 2. Ç'jan' k'to gjám qi po i bjen era?²⁴ (What are these echoes coming along with the wind)

Albanian	English		
(o) O o Ç'jám k'to gjám e ej o po jo bjen e-ra ah o o luft' o o oh e po ho ba ha ajn-o oh e eh e Ru-go-va ah Pe-ja ah.	What're these echoes Oh wind is bringing Oh war, oh oh Rugova and Peja Are fighting oh.		
Ç'jan' k'to gjám qi po i bjen era? Luft' po bâjn' Rugova e Peja.	What're these echoes coming along with the wind? Gjakova and Peja are fighting.		

²⁴ Rexhep Munishi, "Këngët malësorçe shqiptare", Prishtinë, 1987, P. 219-220.



Notation 3. Third song

Table 2. O po fja-lo për tel ih²⁵ (Telegram words)

Albanian	English		
e ja po thu u-je Gja-ko-ve-es-o u	Through telegram words		
(o) e aj tha çou e e de el!	Tell to Gjakova		
e ja po thu u-je Gja-ko u	Raise up and go out		
(e) o e tha ço ou-jo ou e de e el-o u.	Tell to Gjakova		
	It's said to raise up and go out.		
Fjalë për tel:			
Thuj Gjakovës 'Çou e del!"	Telegram words:		
thuj Gjakovës 'Çou e del!"	Tell to Gjakova "raise up and go outl"		
	Tell to Gjakova "raise up and go out"		

Note: The presented songs are without phonetic changes, written as sung by the singers. For translation or adaptation in English, the songs were converted into the standard Albanian dialect.

In each of the three highland songs, the passion and emotion of their message can be felt by the receiver. They convey a sense of urgency that is short and precise. Through the textual structure, it invites the listener to imagine the performer standing atop a tall tower facing the next in a distance, surrounded by majestic mountains, he calls out the warning or instruction. His own voice answers back to him as he awaits a reply in the stillness of the moment. These songs create a unique captive experience by their listeners, as they jump into the Albanian history in their minds and try to translate their message.

In the music score, one can notice mostly flat notes are sung. But of greater uniqueness is the long rest between phrases. Of course, these long pauses are there to accommodate the length of the echo needed to carry its message across a far distance.

Conclusion

The fact that the variants of these songs are usually not numerous, they generally use archetypes of older forms of practice, enriching them mostly with textual changes, but also with the melodic nuances from province to province. Their artistic value might seem questionable. It is in the versatility of these creations, which is one

of their main features and their folkloric character, that space can be found to identify their indisputable artistic value.

Similarly, it can be said that the creations themselves, as complex as they are in fulfilling a practical-utilitarian role through their aesthetic expression or presentation, it is understood how they come in syncretism to, with complexity meet specific needs. The evidence satisfies this even more. First, these creations usually have poetic texts, taken or borrowed from more complete poetic creations and are developed in historical epics in the Northern Balkan territories. Consequently, they also fall short in revealing their true value. Second, it is true that highland songs do not have a welldeveloped melodic line, but in themselves they contain melismatic-recitative melodies. Such an assertion means that highland songs come with a variety of figurative and decorative sounds. Third, the artistic value and perception in these songs are related to and conditioned by their performers, through the skills they use to convey their message to the community.

It is exactly through the combination of textual and musical values, which serve to meet the practical-utilitarian needs of the performer, that the genuine artistic value of the highland songs are realized. In most cases it is not about the type of audience who hears them, but about the communities of those practicing and of those receiving

²⁵ Rexhep Munishi, "Këngët malësorçe shqiptare", Prishtinë, 1987, P. 240.

the message of the songs, understand and value their practice, and do not consider them just as traditional songs. The authors of this article believe that even in a broader scope the interpretation of these creations arouses curiosity and provides aesthetic pleasure. Usually, these songs are not sung in vain during the various folk festivals as

they have been sung, in most cases, not very successfully, because they attract the attention of spectators from home and abroad, who have often seen old forms of Albanian singing, but never have they felt the pleasure of experiencing the unique and diverse nature the highland songs convey through the rich artistic value they carry.

Notes for the pictures

Location	Name and surname	Age	Occupation	The number of song
Batushë -Gjakova	Isak Halili	60	Illiterate farmer	1
Batushë -Gjakova	Isak Halili	60	Illiterate farmer	2
Batushë -Gjakova	Hajdar Habibi	55	Farmer	2
Karadak - Gjilan	Zija Aliu	30	Dancer	3
Karadak - Gjilan	Izet Kurteshi	35	Dancer	3

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