

Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck, eds. and trans. Songs of the Frontier Warriors, Këngë Kreshnikësh. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004. Glossary. Sources. Bibliography. xviii + 414 pp. \$41.00. ISBN 0-86516-412-6.

Robert Elsie offers the reader “a selection of songs from the best-known cycle of Albanian epic verse.” He adds: “As the product of a little-known culture and a difficult, rarely studied language, the Albanian epic has tended to remain in the shadow of Bosnian epic, with which it has undeniable affinities. This translation may thus be regarded as an initial attempt to rectify the imbalance and to give scholars and the reading public in general an opportunity to delve into the exotic world of the northern Albanian tribes” (xi). This volume does just that.

Noting that the collecting and publishing of Muslim traditional songs in Bosnia and Herzegovina was facilitated by Austria’s occupation of those territories in 1878, Elsie rightfully points out that conditions under which Muslim and Roman Catholic clans lived in North Albania in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and under Enver Hoxha between 1944 and 1985, made it all but impossible for serious scholars in Albania – to say nothing of Kosova in the 1990s – to pay much attention to epic songs in the Highlands which indeed seemed to echo those of their Muslim Slav neighbors. He identifies early Albanian scholars and poets, particularly the Franciscans who were trained in Bosnia and Austria, who collected songs in the North Albanian Highlands of the Muslim heroes from Utbina, an Ottoman enclave on the border of the Seven Kingdoms (Christian Europe). The earliest among them was killed by a Bosnian Serb, the others jailed or executed by a communist regime in Tirana dominated by southerners, or Tosks. Northerners (Gegs) in Kosova fared no better under Serbian military occupation following two world wars and under Milosevic.

It was in 1937 that the final, 15,613-line version of Father Gjergj Fishta’s literary epic Lahuta e Malcis (The Highland Lute) was published. Its cantos glorified defenders of clan honor after the Austrian border reached North Albanian territories. In the same year, edited songs of the heroes of Utbina were published in Tirana in volume two of the series Visaret e Kombit (Treasures of the Nation). In the mid 1930s the Homeric scholar Milman Parry of Harvard University recorded on aluminum discs songs of the Ottoman borderlands from bilingual Albanian singers in Novi Pazar, and in 1937 his former graduate assistant

Albert Lord collected dictated epics of the frontier warriors from singers in the North Albanian Highlands. Efforts to collect and publish Albanian oral traditional epics were made in Kosova and the neighboring Highlands under increasingly adverse conditions in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite current hardships, scholars at the Albanological Institute in Prishtina continue at the present time to dedicate themselves to that project.

Elsie describes the connection between Bosnian and North Albanian songs that revolve around the brothers Mujo and Halili and their constant companions, the thirty agas, as follows: "It is understandable... that they have a common origin and, in essence, reflect a common culture. After transmission, however, the Albanian epic evolved in a solely Albanian milieu and took on many purely Albanian characteristics, values, extra-linguistic forms of expression, and it is this that makes it fascinating. Though the toponyms remained, the background conflict in the narrative shifted from warfare between Muslims and the Christians to warfare between the Albanians and *shkjas*, that is, the Slavs" (xvii). Not surprisingly, I might add, the vaguely recollected northern Bosnian-Hungarian frontier, along which Albanians, including singers, had indeed fought, was all but replaced in the songs by a much closer, and equally hostile borderland off the Dalmatian-Montenegrin coast, one that was home to a host of semi-human and animal mythological creatures found in Albanian narrative songs and magical tales.

The excellent reworking by the translators of irregular octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines into "more standard verse patterns and more common metres" (xvii) definitely succeeds in drawing the reader into the often fantastic world of traditional epics still being recreated and recorded in the Highlands of North Albania. The songs selected, which range in length between eighty and 674 lines, begin with young Mujo's drinking the milk of *zanas*, or mountain nymphs, never again to be bullied by playmates, and follow his later exploits and those of his younger brother Halili as they assemble hunting and raiding parties, cross into enemy territory, duel and defeat their enemies, steal Christian brides, or recover their own from them. The cycle presented ends with an account of Mujo's death in the mountains and his resurrection by *zanas* seven years later even as a *baloz* (a sea serpent) is attempting to break into his coffin. The sea serpent is slain by Halili, who then helps Mujo climb out of his grave. The brothers return to Utbina to resume their legendary exploits along the frontier.

From the first formulaic, or traditional Opening Invocation (*Lum e lum për t'lumin zot/Nu' jem' kanë e zoti na ka dhanë!* “Blessed we are, thanks to the Almighty!/For nothing we were until god did create us.”) and sometimes elaborated Closing Invocations

(*Njishtu thonë se na atje kurr s'jem' kanë./Njishtu thonë se ka kanë motit/Ndimën paçim na prej zotit!* (So we are told, for we could not be present,/ so we are told, for much time has gone by now./ And so may the grace of our god be upon us). Or, *Se atje un nuk jam kenë,/ Si kam ndie e si m'kanë thanë;/ Se kto janë prralla prej motit,/ Ndimen paçim na prej zotit* (Although myself I was not present,/ So I heard it, so they told me,/ Very ancient stories these are,/May the grace of God be with us!)) Elsie and Mathie-Heck draw the reader into the still active oral traditional world of the North Albanian Highlands, the rhythm of their lines indeed matched by the fidelity shown the original *prrilla*.

Elsie provides a glossary of epithets, personal and place names, and figures in Albanian mythology. He lists the narrators and published sources of the songs and adds a selected bibliography of Albanian, South Slavic, and Balkan epic verse, and of heroic epic verse in general (367-414). His scholarly studies and translation efforts continue to widen the audience of Albanian literary poets and, in this remarkable volume, North Albania's singers of oral traditional tales.

John Kolsti  
The University of Texas