

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v8i1.1761

Citation: Miftari, V., & Visoka, A. (2019). The Hero of Great Deeds: From Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors to French Chansons de Geste. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 8(1), 237-242. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v8i1.1761>

The Hero of Great Deeds: From *Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors* to French *Chansons de Geste*

Vehbi Miftari¹, Avdi Visoka²

Abstract

The hero of the *Albanian Frontier Warriors' Songs* is a hero of the great deeds such as the one in the French *Chansons de geste*, which is a source of inspiration for the notion of deeds / gestures. However, the heroic effect of the deeds differs from the cultural and identity extent, from the genre, the legendary and historical context. *Muji and Halili* are epic heroes of *Albanian Frontier Warriors songs*. They act independently or in accordance with other epic heroes, which usually are thirty. Their heroic acts vary from the French epic heroes. They differ even from Roland, because they are primarily motivated by the protection of individuals' possessions and lives and as heroic, epic and erotic adventures, fights of honour, pride, and local identity. Contrary to them, Roland gets more of the size of the community hero, distinguished by protecting cultural and identity norms of a broader character as well as doctrinal. This paper intends to develop a comparative analysis of *Albanian Frontier Warriors' Songs* and French *Chansons de geste*, above all between the songs of the legendary discourse in Albanian early epic literature and the *Roland's song*. The aim is to create a perspective between these two heroisms of Albanian and French oral epic, without denying the influence of the song and its hero on creating identity lines.

Keywords: Hero, Epic songs, Frontier Warriors, Chansons de geste, Identity.

¹ Prof. Ass. Dr., University "Haxhi Zeka", Peja, Kosovo. E-mail: vehbi.miftari@unhz.eu

² Prof. Assoc. Dr., University of Prishtina, Prishtina, Kosovo. E-mail: avdi.visoka@uni-pr.edu

Introduction

Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors (Alb. "*Kangët kreshnike shqipe*"), as oral epic songs, are characterised by the legendary discourse created either as an inspiration from the imaginary heroic deeds or with an historical premise that become popular. Consequently, the hero must himself belong to this type of genre.

Considering that these heroes represent the national culture, folksingers, willingly or not, reveal the legendary character of these Songs from cultural and social autochthonous sources. However, the universal effects of *hero faces* (Campbell, 1993) that qualify the hero as such, create similarities with heroes of other epics such as *Chansons de geste*, a creation with clear historic premises.

The song, as a verbal creation, conveys "the echo of the epopee coming from the depth of the centuries" (Thiesse, 2004: 25-27) and the memory of features that make the hero *hero* everywhere. This echo is the awareness of the existence of "similar" heroes or communities, as entities that have cultivated the same rituals, traditions and customs with us; they have sometimes cultivated the same language and lived roughly in the same territory, constituting a "homogenous community" (Gellner, 1987), distinct from other social communities.

Below we have proven that, through a comparative perspective, we can see some heroic features in the Albanian Frontier Warriors epic and in the French *Chansons de geste*. The hero and the heroic gestures have been seen within the *song* influence on creation and conveyance of awareness of common culture, for identity features of the community.

Hero and Identity

As rightly affirmed, "the songs concerning Muja and Halili are called in Albanian *kangë kreshnikësh*, meaning *Songs of Heroes*" (Skendi, 1954: 99). Therefore, the *frontier warrior* (Alb. *kreshniku*) has a hero profile; the heroic aim, means and limit, even in a psychological sense similar to *Chansons des geste*. Even Çabej is of the opinion that *frontier warrior* has the meaning of "noble, brave, heroic" (Çabej, 1939: 163-164), what relates the Frontier Warrior in a way with the status of the hero of *Chansons de geste*, with his noble ambitions and dignity fighting for the cultural, religious interests of the community he belongs to. In a nutshell, the status of the Frontier Warrior has indications of moving towards the status of Roland, though, as such, is lesser related to the *high politics* of the community than in the French Songs (Lucken, 2003).

As a culture that lies largely in northern Albania, the Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors have created the myth of the hero fighting for the territory (in this context also for the community, the interests of the Landlords/Knights (Ottoman Turkish. *Aga*, Alb. *Aga*) of Jutbina) and for himself. This hero has two kinds of identities, personal and collective.

The first is related to individual property (Berisha, 2008: 21) and extends like a structure imported from the cavalry myth that fights for property, for his horse, or for the Beauty. Unlike the *Chansons de geste*, which minimizes the role of love or the female, in the *Albanian Songs of the Frontier Warriors* these phenomena suit usually in the form of *amour courtois*, a concept developed by the French *courtois* literature. Regarding to this concept the love has been treated as an instrument used mostly by the royal court which expresses the noble relationship and is a synonym of a very strong relationship between the females and love (Zumthor, 1972).

In the other case, however, the heroism of the Frontier Warrior is related to the protection of the territory of the community of other Frontier Warriors, to the limits of other kingdoms. Hence, the memory of the territory stretches to where the boundaries of land lords' lands lie, and common language, tradition, customs, rites and inheritance are shared. In the Songs of the Frontier Warriors, they are usually thirty, speak the same language, have the same traditions, and cultivate the same rituals. Beyond the boundaries

of their lands begin the possessions of others. Therefore, they have also become known as *Frontier Warriors* (Elsie, 2003). Unlike the number 30, as most typical for Albanian Frontier Warriors or Landlords, there are twelve frontier warriors in *La chanson de Roland*:

Fair sir king, you have given me a great gift.

Now choose me out twelve of your barons and

I will attack the twelve companions. (*The Song of Roland*, 1999: 19).

876 Sire, mon bon roi, vous m'avez fait un grand cadeau.

877 Choisissez-moi douze de vos seigneurs et

878 avec eux je combattrai les douze pairs. (*La chanson de Roland*, 1979: 125).

In Albanian Songs of Frontier Warriors, the territory is historically unspecified. It is identified as *Jutbina* (also known as *invented territory* – Schwyzer, 2004), known as a region in today's Bosnia, which is the identification map of the tribe / land lords, and is distinct from territories and cultures of *the other*, which is referred as the *Kingdom (Alb. Krajli)* in the song.

In contrast to the Albanian songs, in the cycles of *Chansons de geste*, life takes place in a fully constituted France with a consolidated crown of the king (usually this is Grand Charlemagne, as it appears in the oral representation *La chanson de Roland*), but also of the other representatives: Guillaume d'Orange, Doon de Mayence and others (Zink, 2017: 77). This historical fog, which also gives the Albanian songs a legendary attribute, gives them fantastic special effects, mainly through mythological events and figures, which makes them distinguish themselves from the *Chansons de geste* with a derived historical context. Consequently, the nature of the heroin of the Songs of the Frontier Warriors implies more fantastic effects and Herculean features, as it is acclaimed, than French songs. The similarities of the Albanian Frontier Warriors with the area of the ancient Greek and Indo-European world appear more tangible, especially in the sense of echoes of the natural world transmitted by these heroes.

The life of the Frontier Warrior is developed within the territory of the land lords, united under the authoritarian voice and the power of the sword of Muji as a leader, giving the territory *homogeneous territorial* features, with elements of an unspoken but existent political regime, as an ally of one kingdom or another. Muji's bond with the King of Istanbul, as in the Albanian and Bosnian epics, seems to be a stratification of frontier warriors' songs in the time period from the XVII century onwards. As mentioned above, their territory of Jutbina extends to the borders of the *krajlive*, the kingdoms of the *other*, the Hungarian, Latin and Slavic kingdoms (*Alb. maxhar, talir, shkjau*) where the same language is not commonly spoken and where there are other traditions. The Frontier Warriors are located within the *frontiers* and are gradually called Jutbina's land lords. Therefore, they are the first of the tribe or region, connected by the language, the territory, and the tradition, which will be latter transformed into a distinctive ethnic repertoire (Smith, 2009: 23) and will present the ethno-symbolist basis for seeking common identity roots. Within the tradition of Frontier Warriors' Songs, there are some of these rudimentary premises that have not yet been raised to the level of awareness for the ethnicity. They constitute the pre-ethnic premise of collective identity. Such identity features, whether ethnic or religious, are to a great extent articulated in *Chansons de geste*, and heroes are echoing such features of a community character.

Although reference to events and realities is unmistakable, Albanian Frontier Warriors cultivate the desire to systematize life in one or more places in which common life happens. The folksinger wants these places to remind well-known locations to the reader, thus gaining the status of the known locations, although in this case they are more thought-out sites than historical real-world locations. Thus, they reach the level of referrals coming from the memory of the folksinger and the listener for them, but not really defined. The will to bear a resemblance to real life has probably pushed the folksinger into later varieties to insist more on linking the singing to historical events (in Bosnian epic this is even more probable), proving that also to replace the legendary theme with the real one. In the song *Halili grabs the White Begzade* (Berisha, 2008:

156-174), let's say, the chief of Frontier Warriors, Muji, is no longer a land lord of Jutbina (a memory territory, historically unspecified), but "Muja from Klladusha"; a toponim in Bosnian variant that proves to be experienced as a historically known location. The "other" area, meanwhile, is no longer just the Slavic kingdom *krajlia*, but it is determined locally. In the above mentioned song, Stojan Harambashi is "originary from Çardak" (Berisha, 2008: 159). This area is defined as the "other" area not only from the topic, but also from the pre-ethnos cultural and religious community.

Unlike the Frontier Warriors' Songs in Albanian language, which gave the heroes' deeds a legendary historical dimension by demanding a *contract of trust* with the reader, *Chansons de geste* seeks in the literature the deeds of historical heroes; the historic hero re-emerges as an epic hero. While in Albanian Songs, the literary discourse only proves here and there, rarely, to get a historical coat, *Roland's* history is the substrate on which the literary creation is based (Zumthor, 1972). In the Albanian Frontier Warriors' Songs, history is related to the myth, with the belief in the *occurrence* (which is essentially non-historical), but which tries to rise at the level of (historical) occurrence, whether the history creates the epic myth / hero at *Roland* (Zumthor, 1972).

Heroes and Order

Due to an epic grace in letters, the Albanian Frontier Warriors' Song recognises a kind of social organization like *The Frontier Warrior Order*, according to which the head, Muji, is a person of bravery, related to the territory and property, the rites and customs. The Frontier Warriors' Songs represent social life as a mirror of an unconsolidated and unqualified feudal order in which the land lords live independently (individual identity), but, similarly to the knights or heroes of *Chansons de geste*, also live interdependent "in society of thirty land lords". Between the authentic culture (social life of Frontier Warriors) and other cultures there is always *the boundary*, which is not entirely physical, it is also spiritual: it divides the Frontier Warriors (Albanians) from the Slavic kingdom (also a personification of the ambitions for territory), the moral mentality canonized in the Code (*Alb. Kanuni*) and carried into the song as a customary structure, from the minds of the other. The above represents the authentic hero of these songs.

On the other hand, in the *Chansons de geste* the heroes act in a consolidated feudal order. A feudal hierarchy operates therein, conditioned by vassal-sovereign subordination. The hero is an example of loyalty to his master; he is his chosen for the noble virtues and always represents the collective, which is at stake. He is willing to be sacrificed without hesitation in defence of the territory and his faith. He is representative of the feudal ideal, of the high morality, of the virtues of the warrior who always obeys the very insistent honour's code (Boutet, 1982).

Even the Frontier Warriors refer to their territory as a kind of their physical, but also spiritual kingdom. It influences the creation of an awareness of the values of the community of the Frontier Warriors, giving a distinctive feature to the community as well. But above all, the Frontier Warrior is distinguished by the heroic character of the hero who shares his power with the *oras* and *zanas* (fairies, protective mythical mountain spirits) that, like the ancient Greek heroes, come to their aid or push them downhill. These elements of the Frontier Warriors' Songs are more closely aligned with the old Indo-European legends, but also with the Arthurian, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon legends, than with *Chansons de geste*, which as a fantastic element have mostly the angel of a religious nature (Whatelet-Williem, 1970).

Thus, the heroes of the Frontier Warriors' Songs embody the concept of *territorial culture*. They cultivate the sense of territoriality, giving impetus to cultivating environmental culture and distinction. The land lords, as homogeneous social category, live in a certain environment; they are influenced by it and subject to its destiny. They cultivate the sense of inevitable battles for the territory, are the epic fighters of the border.

In Albanian national songs, as in the French *Chansons de geste*, the Frontier Warriors represent the feudal and medieval values and ideals. But, likewise, these songs are also represented by contradictions, disputes, rivalries, betrayal of feudal heroes.

Conclusion

The Songs of Frontier Warriors represent the tradition of the practical and imaginative life of Albanians. They are a monument to their life's culture. Consequently, they are also identified with features of the customary tradition that emerges from the Code of Lekë Dukagjini (*Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*), the customary Albanian code, known by the end of the Middle Ages and onwards. These songs still act as a monumentalizing imaginary of the traditional Albanian culture. Since the territory (landlords' properties) is the place of common memory, the life that is developed there and described in the song is a witness to this culture and territory, as well as a proof of the cultivated sense of the community. The spiritual-symbolic territory created on this territory, lies on the background as an identity cornerstone.

Chansons de geste as a medieval narrative of heroic deeds rises on the myth of the knight who recognizes ethnic and identity missions and goes beyond the narrow individual interests. Therefore, the heroes accomplishing these heroic deeds have in the meantime been transformed into national heroes, as part of the history and the refinement of the historical language. Individual feeling of these heroes subordinated to the mission's feeling.

Meanwhile, the identity of the Frontier Warrior is complex, in its own way. In Albanian literature, the Songs of the Frontier Warriors can determine the territory according to the memory size of the Frontier Warrior's memory. While *Roland's* identity has a much clearer historical and ethnic background, even religious, by putting the hero in the role of the defender of this identity who takes on doctrinal premise, the Albanian Frontier Warrior protects his life and community and territory before defending doctrinal concepts.

Each of these heroes emerges strongly motivated as a literary entity, a verbal epic, which exerts powerful influence even today, not only in the literary cultures of the nations where they were created. They generate cultural, national and literary identity at once.

References

- Berisha, Anton N. (2008). *Antologji e kangëve kreshnike shqiptare*. Prishtinë: Faik Konica.
- Boutet, Dominique (1982). "Les chansons de geste et l'affermissement du pouvoir royal (1100-1250)". *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 1(37), 3-14.
- Campbell, J. (1993). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: FontanaPress.
- Çabej, Eqrem (1939). *Per gjenezën e literatures shqipe*. Shkodër: Hylli i Dritës, XV.
- Elsie, Robert (2003). *Songs of the Frontier Warrior: An Albanian Epic*. U.S.: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers.
- Gellner, Ernest (1987). *Culture, Identity and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koliqi, Ernest (1937). *Epica popolare Albanese*. Padova: S.N.
- Koliqi, Ernest (1972). *Saggi di letteratura Albanese*. Firenze: Olschki.

- La Chanson de Roland* (1979). (Ed. de Pierre Jonin). Paris: Gallimard.
- Lucken, Christopher (2003). "Le Moyen Âge ou la Fin des Temps. Avenirs d'un refoulé". *Littérature*, 130, 8-25.
- Skendi, Stavro (1954). *Albanian and South Slavic oral epic poetry*. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society.
- Smith, Anthony D. (2009). *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Schwytzer, Philip (2004). *Literature, Nationalism and Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thiesse, Anne-Marie (1999). *La création des identités nationales – Europe XVIII-XX siècle*. Paris: Éd. de Seuil.
- The Song of Roland* (1999). (Trans.: Jessie Crosland). Cambridge, Ontario: Publications Old French Series.
- Tuoldus (2003). *Kanga e Rolandit*. (Trans.: Gjon Shllaku). Tiranë: Naim Frashëri.
- Whatelet-Williem, Jeanne (1970). "La fée Morgain dans la chanson de geste". *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 51(13), 209-219.
- Zink, Michel (2014). *Littérature française du Moyen-Âge*. Paris: Presse Universitaire de France.
- Zumthor, Paul (1954). *Histoire littéraire de la France médiévale*. Paris: Presse Universitaire de France.
- Zumthor, Paul (1972). *Essai de poétique médiévale*. Paris: Le Seuil.