

KOÇO BIHIKU

*An outline of Albanian
Literature*

Translated by Ali Cungu

THE «NAIM FRASHËRI» STATE PUBLISHING HOUSE
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I. EARLY ALBANIAN WRITERS

The Albanians are among the most ancient peoples of the Balkans. Their forefathers, the Illyrians, who had settled in the south-western part of this peninsula along the Adriatic, some centuries before the new era, had formed a number of separate states. They were well advanced economically and culturally. Situated at the cross-roads of East and West, for a long time the seat of important European events, it fell to the lot of the Albanians to fight their way through history. Albania was more than once riven with brutal aggression, its cities and towns razed to the ground, its fields laid waste under the trampling foot of strangers. It became the seat of repeated uprisings against the monstrous vandalism of the invaders. The history of the Albanian people, from the very earliest days to the most recent present, is replenished with battles fought to safeguard their freedom, independence and their land from foreign invaders. But though engaged in perpetual struggle against countless onslaughts from various invaders, in perpetual struggle for existence, the Albanians have yet been able to create their own national culture.

Historical data go to prove that cultural development in Albania had its beginnings as early as at the epoch of the Illyrian states. Later on, in the early middle ages, it flourished anew. A few churches of this later period, of the XI-XII centuries have survived to this day in southern Albania. But the bulk of the cultural monuments of this period have been

swept away in the maelstrom of raging battles against aggressors. Albanian culture made further progress under the feudal principalities that had emerged after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in the XIII-XIV centuries. In addition to the castles, bridges and churches which the people had built at this time, they also created many beautiful lyric and epic songs and legends which are outstanding in style and beauty of expression. But what is of major historical and cultural significance, is the fact that Albanian started to be written in its own script during this period. In a report by the Archbishop of Tivari in 1332 it is written: «Although the Albanians have a separate language of their own different from Latin, yet they use Latin characters in their daily transactions and in all their books.» Very few cultural monuments of the middle ages have come down to us in our days.

What have survived from this period are a few fragments of a culture in full bloom in mediaeval Albania prior to the onslaught of the Turks, (1423-1426), which brought it to a standstill. During the five centuries that followed Albania languished under the Ottoman yoke and its history was full of trials and hardships. With its cities burned to ashes, its countryside laid waste by the frequent campaigns, Albania presented a sorry picture, indeed. Economic and social progress came to a standstill. But even under such circumstances the Albanian people never ceased fighting. The foreign invaders could neither exterminate nor assimilate them. On the contrary and though without a state of their own, the Albanians kept on developing their culture, their arts and letters.

Albanian literature had its beginnings during the XVI-XVII centuries. «The Baptizing Formula», is the earliest document of Albanian writing, contained in a circular letter sent to the clergy by Paul Angelus, the Archbishop of Durres, close collaborator and counselor of Scanderbeg.

Albanian literature at the outset consisted of religious books, either translated from the holy scriptures or as original works of Albanian religious writers.

«The Mass Book» by Gjon Buzuku was the first book to appear in the Albanian language in 1555. Nothing is known of the life and literary activity of this author except that he wrote this book during the period from March 20, 1554 to January 5, 1555. By translating passages from the Bible, from the Book of Prayers, from the ritual of Catholic faith the author aimed at coming to the help of the clergy to better organize their daily religious services in the mother tongue.

Albanian writing was further developed during the XVII century. Pjeter Budi stands out as the most prominent writer and patriot of this period. Budi was born in 1566 in Guri Bardhë, a village in Mati bordering on the Elbasan and Tirana highland. He served as a parson in various regions for twelve years. But he was never idle wherever he happened to be. He bemoaned the miserable condition under which the people languished. Budi put his whole heart and soul to the work of liberating the country from foreign domination. He took active part in all the meetings and conventions which elaborated plans for a general uprising against the Turkish invaders. Budi has left behind a detailed study of the situation in Albania during that period. In these reports he stands out as an able promoter and active agitator of the movement for emancipation from the foreign yoke. P. Budi translated and adapted religious writings. In 1618 he published «The Christian Doctrine», a religious catechism. «The Roman Ritual» published in 1621 treats of the year-round religious rites and ceremonies. «The Table of Confessions» was published as an appendix to the above-mentioned book. Of special significance to the history of Albanian literature, however, are the poems contained in these various books of his. In these poems, inspired by religious motives, we find scenes and personages depict-

ed in a lively style and artistic taste. Scholars of Albanology consider Budi as the pioneer poet in Albanian literature.

Frano Bardhi (1606-1643) is another outstanding forerunner of Albanian ancient culture of this period. Bardhi is the authour of an Albanian-Latin vocabulary of 5000 words which he published in 1635. The Appendix of this vocabulary contains a list of 113 proverbs and idioms mostly collected from the mouth of the Albanian people. But Bardhi's most distinguished work is his Apollogy on «Scanderbeg» (1636). The book is historical in its nature and it is written in Latin. It is a refutation of the writings of a Bosnian bishop who tried to question Scanderbeg's Albanian origin. Bardhi's work is permeated throughout with the author's love of his country and his national pride. Basing his arguments on undeniable historical facts and presenting them with the consumate skill of an able dialectician who has full command of language and wit, F. Bardhi invalidated his opponent's theses and called them historically unfounded.

Pjeter Bogdani (?1625-1689) is the last representative of this religious-didactic literature of the XVI-XVII centuries in Albania. A clergyman like his predecessors, P. Bogdani led by no means a life of comfort and ease. Persecuted by the Turks he had to retreat to the remotest regions of the northern Albanian highlands. Rambling from place to place he tried to organize united action against the Turks. P. Bogdani wrote a theological treatise on «The Bands of the Prophets» which he published in 1685. The value of this work rests on the fact that it enriched the Albanian vocabulary with new terms and expressions essential to any writings on abstract themes.

The works by Gjon Buzuku, Frano Bardhi, Pjeter Budi and Pjeter Bogdani, though of a religious nature, played no slight role in the field of history and culture. During the period between the XVI and XVII centuries, when the Turkish invaders tried to extend

their sway over the entire country and assimilate the Albanians through a policy of religious discrimination, the activity of these pioneer authors of ancient Albanian literature had a benign progressive effect. In their works one reads the resistance the Albanians offered to the attempts of the foreigners to assimilate the people, one reads the struggle of the people to safeguard their culture and their mother tongue. A peculiar characteristic of all of these authors is their attachment for the mother tongue. In the epilog to his «Mass Book» Buzuk writes that he had compiled this book «as a token of his affection for our people». Bardhi bemoans the fact that the Albanian language «is being sapped and adulterated». He also inspires his readers with the feeling of national pride for the heroic past of the country. Bogdani urges us not to neglect the quest for knowledge and for the mother tongue. The attempt to develop culture and to impart knowledge is another typical feature of the activity of the ancient authors. Ignorance prevailing among the people was for them the root of all evil, the primary and fundamental cause of their plight. «Our country is languishing in murky slavery... because knowledge and wisdom have been neglected.» says Bogdani. He demands that Albanian culture be developed, the people should be given books in the mother tongue, the mother tongue should be elaborated so it can become an efficient means of acquiring culture, its treasure should be carefully accumulated and preserved. This appeal to the intellectuals to write books is found in Budi's works as well.

From the XVIII century onward Albanian culture develops along different lines. As a result of the new historical and political conditions of Albania under Turkish domination culture, in a number of Albanian cities, was remodeled after that of the Eastern peoples, of the Arabs, Persians and Turks. Many customs and traditions of these peoples penetrated into the social life of the people. The educational and religious insti-

tutions of Islam set up in the principal cities of Albania during the XVII and XVIII centuries helped in disseminating the rudiments of this culture. The curriculae of these schools contained literature and rhetorics in addition to various religious subjects. In addition to the study of the Turkish language the students were taught Arabic and Persian too. The students thus came into contact with the literature of the Turks, Persians and Arabs, they became acquainted with the works of lay writers and with the rich poetry of the East. The new elements that penetrated into the cultural life of the people could not but exert an influence on Albanian literature, as well. Thus, during the period between the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX centuries, Albanian literature developed under the influence of oriental subject matter, poetic form, artistic approach to life and language. This phase of Albanian literature known as Albanian literature in Arabic characters or of the «bards», developed only in poetry. It must be stressed that the poets of this period did not treat of the purely spiritual and mystic alone but of love and the sensual as well. *Nezim Frakulli* of Berati who died in 1760, is one of the pioneers of this literature. From the scanty information we have about him we come to the conclusion that his was by no means a smooth life of no worries. Yet N. Frakulli's poems are permeated with a spirit of optimism. He sings to Nature in a style as fresh and fluent as it is beautiful:

Gorgeous spring is in full bloom,
And the world in beauty dressed;
Festive traits does life assume:
What a joy for those distressed!

Gardens are in verdure decked,
Like the bride in nuptial veil;
Every face does love reflect,
Dazzled is the nightingale!

These notes of optimism are not rare in *Nezim Frakulli's* works. «Of what use is the other if wa

cannot enjoy this life?» he asks of an ascetic dervish. In his poems he pays homage to friendship and thunders against the vice of treachery and disloyalty in society.

At the time and in the environment in which the poet lived he ran against a lot of vice, servility, hypocrisy and calumny among state employees. These things disgusted him and he turned his acrid satire on these negative elements of officialdom. He has something positive to say in his didactic poetry. N. Frakulli's ideas on nobility are progressive. The poet denounces the current conception of the feudalists on the nobility of man. According to him one should not brag about his wealth or birth, for real nobility lies in one's skill and learning.

Those who are for nothing good,
Sit and brag about their birth,
Is there any likelihood
That cow's dung have amber's worth?

Just because they own some wealth,
Put on airs and have their way.
Do they think there is no death?
They may come to grief some day?

In many of his poems N. Frakulli expresses his own ideas on poetry, on its role etc. At odds with other contemporary poets he asserts that poetry is an inspiration, a gift, and not a mere list of verses which one can set to rhyme through continuous drill and practice. The poet, he claims, is entitled to attack all the ugly aspects of life and of people's conduct.

Suleiman Naipi who died in 1772 was a gifted lyric poet, a contemporary of N. Frakulli. In his poems inspired by his self-conscious and frank lyricism, he sings to love, to the joy of living, to the beauty of woman («Smartly-decorated Mahmude», «The Passionate Dandy»). Lyric poetry acquired a rare subtlety in the hands of *Suleiman Naipi*. He was at the same time a master of poetic diction.

Hasan Zyko Kamberi was another XVIII century poet. Unlike Nezim Frakulli, whose poetical works did not escape the motives and conventional forms of oriental poetry, H. Z. Kamberi's poems are closely related to and reflect the life of the Albanian village in particular. With H. Z. Kamberi Albanian literature drifts towards actual life and treats of social themes. Deploing the hard times under which the bulk of population have to live, the sore spots in the social life of the times, the status of the women etc. are the main motives of the poet's creativity. In his poem on «Money» H. Z. Kamberi exposes the moral debasement of the upper classes and the depravity of the ruling circles as a result of the rising power of money in society. Money, he says, is coveted by the king and his retinue, by the viziers and the pashas. The religious dignitaries, too, hanker after money:

All the pashas, all the beys,
Dignitaries of all kinds
Over money lose their heads,
In their purses are their minds.

Do these lines not give a vivid picture of the decrepid, corrupt political system of the Turks? The poem «Money» does not only expose the ugly features of the political regime, of the corrupt administration, of the judiciary and other state organs of the Turkish authorities, but it also gives a side view of the economic and social life of the XVIII century especially in the Korça region.

In his poem on «Porridge» the poet enters into the spirit of the poverty-stricken people of the Albanian village and sympathizes with them. The half-humoristic style he makes use of does not prevent the poet to give a realistic picture of the deplorable life and the privations which the man in the street has to endure:

Eight months long they cook and eat,
There is meal enough in storage

To the poor it tastes so sweet,
Bless the man who first cooked porridge!

H. Z. Kamberi's style is direct, forceful in color, realistic. Similar scenes of the social life of the times have been depicted by other poets of the XVIII century. His poems on the piteous lot of the Albanian village woman are full of pathos. The misery of the common people is reflected in the sad destiny of their women who «underfed and badly clad cheerless and over-worked ply to their needle and sew for others».

Muhamed Kycyku's (1784-1844) poems are of another nature. In his poem «The Emigrant» the poet speaks of the hard lot of those who abandoned their homes in search of jobs and of their yearning for their homeland:

«Great his pangs, too hard to bear,
His heavy weight the steelyard warps;
When he dies, if he dies there
The grave will not decay his corpse.»

Muhamed Kycyku's poetical productions are inspired by religious sentiments. Thus in his poem «The Drunkard» he fulminates against the lovers of wine and brandy.

But M. Kycyku's masterpieces are: «Erveheja» and «Jusuf and Zelihaja» based on traditional subjects of oriental literature.

«Erveheja» relates in verse the story of a woman who, inspite of the hardships she had to encounter, remains faithful to her husband. Erveheja is depicted as a beautiful, happy and wise woman. She embodies the highest moral virtues of a woman.

M. Kycyus' other poem, «Jusufi and Zelihaja», has the same didactic and moral content but is longer than «Erveheja» and contains 2430 verses.

The problem that preoccupies the author, a life of virtues on this earth, finds expression in the history of a young man, Jusuf, who, like Erveheja, encounters

a lot of hardships but does not deviate from the virtue of moral integrity. The subject matter of the poem is a reproduction of the biblical legend of handsome Joseph and Pentefri's wife, Zolicha. M. Kycyku tries to re-elaborate this legend and at some places to revise and adapt it to the times.

M. Kycyku's poems rendered a valuable contribution to epic poetry especially to long novels in verse. Therein lies their significance in the Albanian literature.

II. ALBANIAN LITERATURE OF THE ARBERESHI *)

Albanian literature was not confined to the mother land alone. The drift of political events in Albania gave Albanian literature a trend of development of its own.

The onslaught of the Turks on Albania brought with not only the devastation of the land but a menace to the very lives of the people. To escape from the fire and sword of the enemy thousands of Albanians of various regions of the country abandoned their homes, their lands, their goods and chattels and fled to Italy. Most of the groups that crossed the Adriatic settled in the poor, less fertile regions of Calabria and Sicily. Here, with no help of any kind, in constant battle with the elements, and, thanks to the sweat of their brow and their thrift, they were able to set up flourishing towns and villages.

Even after having settled in Italy these Albanians never forgot their mother country. Long after their migration they preserved unimpaired their mother tongue, their songs, their customs and traditions, their affection for Albania and the memory of the glorious past of their forefathers. The bulk of the Arbereshi preserve their mother tongue and their old customs to this very day.

The Albanian language was not only kept alive in these Albanian settlements of southern Italy but it was also elaborated in writing throughout these

*) Albanian settlers in Italy.

centuries. A body of literary works have been written in this language, which preserves some of the peculiarities of the Albanian of the middle ages, simultaneously with the development of literature in the mother country.

The earliest record of Albanian writing among the Albanians in Italy is «The Christian Doctrine» by Lek Matranga (1560-1619) which was published in 1592. The book in itself represents a catechism of the Catholic religious dogmas. Of historic and literary significance is the fact that this book contains the first poem ever written in Albanian.

During the XVII and XVIII centuries cultural life is in fuller swing. The Arbereshi begin to be interested in the historical background of their mother country, to collect historical and ethnographic data on the Albanians, to write down Albanian poems and songs preserved all along in the mouth and the memory of the people. New poets emerged who wrote poems of religious motives in the style of oral productions, to wit: Nikolla Brankati (1675-1741), Nikolla Filja (1691-1769), Nikolla Keta (1742-1803) and the most prominent of them, Jul Variboba, who died in 1762, and who wrote a long epic in verse on a topic of sacred history. The merit of this work lies in the fact that in treating the figure of the Holy Virgin, the author deviates from the traditional canons of the Church. To the frigid, lifeless, marble-like picture of the religious classics he adds a touch of life and feeling. Instead of a cold, saint-like figure insusceptible to fellow feeling, in the hands of Variboba she becomes a tender mother full of compassion for those who suffer.

Mother love is expressed by him in very mellow tones. He takes advantage of the popular lullabies and here is what he has created:

«... O son of mine
My love, my life,
My beauty, my joy,
My heaven, my light!

I alone want to embrace you,
And to bring you up in grace and beauty!
He is mine, do not take him from me!
Let me hug you, my heart!
Welcome to me and let me caress you,
Let me implore long days and years for you
Let me nurse and nurture you!»

Variboba's descriptions are true to life and so is the setting or environment in which the events take place. The environment in which the characters of his works move about reminds us of the Arbereshi village with the customs and elements that typify it.

This work is of importance also because it enriches Albanian poetry with new poetical elements, especially with rhymed lines, which were formerly absent from it.

Variboba's «Life of Holy Mary» concludes the earliest stage of Albanian literature among the Albanian settlers in Italy. During the XIX century the literature of the Albanian settlers in Italy will be making long strides ahead. We shall see such prominent poets emerge as De Rada, Dara Jr. and Zef Serembe, who will be the pride and glory of the Albanian literature of the period of National Revival.

III. ALBANIAN LITERATURE OF THE PERIOD OF NATIONAL REVIVAL

Fraught with internal political and economic disension and exhausted in its wars with Russia and Austria, the Ottoman Empire was in a very critical situation during the end of the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX centuries and its very existence was in the balance. This period on the other hand, was characterized by a wave of the movement of the Balkan peoples to emancipate themselves from the unbearable yoke of Turkish domination and create their free, independent states.

The Albanian people, too, took up arms against the foreigner who dominated over them during five hundred years. The first half of this period of our country's history was filled with harsh and repeated attacks of the Albanian peasants against the foreign dominators who, on their part, tightened the knot of their age long oppression of the people in order to put off their impending doom. Unfortunately these uprisings were quelled by blood and fire but they remain, to this day, as a token of the determination of the Albanian people to get rid of the fivehundred-year long foreign domination. Subsequent events went to show that the national consciousness of the Albanians was growing stronger and stronger.

The national liberation movement of the Albanian people was further stimulated during the period of 1877-1878 by the League of Prizren, an organization set up at the end of the war between Russia and