

# *The Phenomenon of Murder as a Symbolic Archetype in the Albanian Oral Narrative*

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the symbolic archetype of murder within Albanian oral narratives, a pivotal element deeply embedded in Albanian folklore. It aims to decode the messages conveyed by the collective unconscious through various murder scenarios—such as sacrifice, fatality, and familial homicide—and assess their impact on shaping the social and cultural fabric of the Albanian community. By analyzing these narratives through a multi-layered interpretative lens, the research explores how these archetypes not only reflect the core values and existential queries of the Albanian people but also contribute to the construction and reinforcement of national identity. This paper argues that the recurring murder themes do more than perpetuate mythic symbols; they also transmit stable moral and legal values crucial for maintaining the continuity and coherence of the Albanian societal structure. The findings suggest that these narratives serve as dynamic interfaces between traditional values and contemporary societal challenges, thus playing a critical role in the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity.

Keywords: Albanian Folklore, Symbolic Archetypes, Collective Unconscious, Narrative Analysis, Cultural Identity

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## Introduction

Human beings have continuously created narratives that not only reflect their existence but also shape their cultural and social identities. These stories are found within "the legends and myths of their social groups" (McAdams, 2015), where the motif of murder in the Albanian oral tradition stands as a profound testament to the complex interplay between individual actions and collective morality. This research paper embarks on an exploratory journey to decipher the symbolic archetypes of murder that resonate deeply within the Albanian folklore tradition, tracing their implications both psychologically and socially.

Drawing on Carl Jung's theory, this study delves into how these archetypes, as universal, archaic patterns and images that derive from the collective unconscious, manifest within Albanian narratives (Jung, 1969). The recurring themes of murder—whether depicted as sacrifice, fatality, or familial betrayal—reveal a rich mosaic of mythic and cultural significances that have long influenced the Albanian social construct. These narratives are not merely relics of a bygone era; rather, they are vibrant expressions of collective concerns, addressing existential questions and societal dilemmas faced by the Albanian people through the centuries. By examining these stories through a modern analytical lens, this study aims to uncover the layers of symbolic meaning that have contributed to the formation and perpetuation of Albanian cultural identity. Dundes emphasizes the importance of interpreting folklore "to understand these deeper meanings", while Bauman highlights "the role of performance in conveying and reinforcing these narratives within the community" (Dundes, 1980; Bauman, 1986).

To illustrate the complexity and variety of the murder archetypes in Albanian folklore, this paper will include a descriptive table summarizing key themes, characters, and societal values embedded within these narratives. This summary will not only serve as a reference point for further discussion but also highlight the intrinsic link between folklore and the socio-ethical frameworks it influences.

Archetype	Description	Symbolic Meaning	Societal Impact	Specific Examples
Sacrifice	Murders occurring as part of ritualistic or heroic acts.	Represents purification and renewal.	Reinforces the values of sacrifice for the greater good.	The sacrifice of Rozafa in castle building.
Fatality	Inevitable murders driven by fate or destiny.	Highlights the inescapable nature of fate.	Questions the role of individual agency within societal constraints.	The murder in "The Found Son" tale.
Familial	Murders involving family members, often linked to betrayal.	Explores trust and betrayal within family bonds.	Reflects on the complexities of family dynamics and moral obligations.	The murder of Gjoni by Pjetri over a woman.

Table 1: Archetypes of murder in Albanian folklore and their societal implications

## I. Murder As Sacrifice and Redemption

Narratives can be seen as a "metaphor for the understanding of human existence," suggesting that the history of people's lives can be viewed as "a dynamic intrigue through which they construct themselves and their identity" (Schiff, 2012). From this perspective, it is important to note that primordial murder, considered by scholars, is the act that fundamentally changed human existence from its inception. The first known divine act, recounted by primitives, is described as a murder—a sacrifice where a god killed a sea monster and used its body parts to create the cosmos. In all mythologies and ancient rituals of the paleo-cultivation period, the "imitation of dei" acts as a justification for "the bloody sacrifices that preceded the construction of primitive dwellings", a temple, bridges, or castles (Eliade, 2019).

The memory reactivated by the rites (i.e., the repetition of primordial murder) plays a decisive role as ancient societies built their daily lives, structuring actions under the weight of responsibility for the choices made. Under the weight of this argument, we will analyze why the stories of building castles, bridges, and monasteries in the oldest Albanian legends and ballads intertwine death with the figures of young women, moreover mothers.

If the Castle is under construction, the mother is sacrificed alive, but the infant survives; if the Castle is completed, the sacrifice spares not even the infant. The fantastical elements of breastfeeding after walling or the infant surviving to inherit do not soften the murder itself or suicide, as both, beyond the polysemic nature of the narrative, reflect a fundamental substratum of the social structures of the Albanian people. Individual consciousness bursts precisely in these mythical and legendary archetypes as a symbolically directed call to the collective unconscious.

Rozafa and Argjiro die in different times, the former in peace and the latter in war, and both are mothers. No enemy threatens survival or accelerates human sacrifice in the case of the legend, perhaps the oldest fully preserved to this day, yet "four men come together and decide that they needed a new bride to keep the walls that fell at night standing" (Haxhihasani, 1966). The three masons symbolize the powerlessness of instinct, of the collective unconscious, in a situation where physical strength is useless. The macabre suggestion to wall one of the brides comes from the one deemed sacred, the only one aware of the real reasons for the walls' collapse, which he certainly does not make clear while showing the solution to keep the walls standing: Go first, oh sacred alive: /.../ *Legacy oh sacred alive, do you know to tell us?/.../-If you work right/ Tie faith and bond, / do not talk in the guesthouse/ Tomorrow hope, dawn lights/ Whichever vase gives you bread/ That mason in the castle wall* (Palaj & Kurti, 1937).

The figure of the old pagan has its origins in the execution of old rituals; he is an "agendum," a perpetual and continuous need, as are the harvests and the reproduction of the tribe, as is the preparation of the young for life in society and the inevitable life of the beyond. "Thus, in the symbolic mythical sense of origin and fate: society explains to the young where this world came from and where we are going, and with instructive figures, it draws the tableau of the world and the fate of man" (Wellek & Warren, 2007).

As the holy old man in the ballad of walling symbolizes consciousness, these walls that must not fall symbolize precisely the national construct of this people aspiring to become a nation, or its ethnos. The creative bard has placed himself with the old man and speaks through him, expressing a part of the ancient stratification of primitive human behavior, marked through

hierarchical man-woman relationships, where the latter must necessarily 'prove' the importance of her existence, through macabre sacrifice in the name of life. Victor Turner's analysis of liminal spaces within societal rituals provides a lens through which we can examine these narratives of sacrifice and murder, viewing these acts not merely as plot elements but "as ritualistic performances that navigate and negotiate communal values and transitions" (Turner, 1969).

In this context, the walls—and the rituals surrounding their construction and the sacrifices they entail—emerge not just as physical structures but as potent symbols of communal cohesion and the liminal phases that the community undergoes in its quest for identity and stability. These narratives underscore the transformative power of liminality where the community collectively engages in the reaffirmation of its cultural and social ethos, navigating through the ambiguities of tradition and modernity.

## **II. The Role of Fate and Community in Albanian Balladic Traditions and the Tragic Element of Love**

In the analysis of murder as fatality within Albanian ballads, themes intricately intertwine with family institutions and inter-tribal relationships, echoing ancient Greco-Roman sacrificial rites. This tragic inevitability aligns with Vladimir Propp's narrative functions, where each character is locked into a role that inevitably drives the story towards its preordained climax (Propp, 1968). This structural function of characters not only propels the narrative but also emphasizes the fatalistic nature of the roles prescribed by societal norms.

The ballad "The Song of the Young Maiden," collected in the 1930s, exemplifies this narrative form. In it, the bride is tragically bound by a customary code to proceed with her wedding despite her severe illness, illustrating the relentless pull of fate and the power of communal expectations over individual will. The text captures this moment of fateful resignation: "I tan Shtufi asht mbledhë në kuvend, thue se viti s'kish tjetër ditë?!" ("All of Shtufi gathered in assembly, as if the year had no other day?!") (Shabani, 1943). Despite her pleas, which resonate with desperation and impending doom, the community insists on adherence to traditional norms. Her tragic procession ends in her death, a poignant moment that highlights the interplay between personal tragedy and communal duty.

Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" elucidates these narratives, suggesting that these ballads do more than tell stories—they serve as culturally encoded practices that articulate complex social norms, personal emotions, and communal values within a richly textured cultural framework (Geertz, 1973). The narratives, therefore, function not only as entertainment but also as moral and social instruction, reflecting upon and reinforcing the moral and societal ethos of the Albanian people.

This cultural portrayal extends beyond mere storytelling, positioning these ballads as crucial cultural artifacts that negotiate community bonds and cultural identity. They illuminate the societal structure and individual psyche of the Albanian communities, revealing how traditions and moral imperatives shape the social fabric. Through these narratives, the community perpetuates its values and beliefs, educating the younger generation on the roles and expectations inherent in their culture. In this way, the ballads contribute significantly to the continuity and reinforcement of cultural norms and identity among Albanians.

Additionally, the tragic pain as a sign of lost love manifests with full force in Albanian folk creations. In tragic circumstances where life prevents the realization of love, not only patriarchal mindsets but also jealousy and human malignancy play roles in thwarting love. Ismail Kadare reflects on this, stating, "In Albanian life, love was generally a drama... To love meant to conflict with society, with family, customs, property, with everything, an unlawful and terrible storm" (Kadare, 1980). In the medieval context, where marital connections were aimed at strengthening political alliances, the fate of Albanian women was predestined to be sacrificed for these broader societal interests.

In supporting this notion, where love in real life could not be achieved due to heavy moral codes, the people realized it in oral art, projecting the ideal of love. Defining humans as "homo narrans," modern studies affirm that the person's life story is filled with significant segments where "core episodes" provide special meaning to existence and allow for the reinterpretation of the past with imaginative capacity toward the future (McAdams, 1988).

### **III. Matricide and Patricide in Albanian Oral Tradition**

Many researchers like Lambertz, Çabej, Gjeçovi, and Fulvio Cordignano have noted the presence of ancient archetypes such as Oedipus and Penelope in Albanian oral creativity, reflecting deep mythological roots (Cordignano, 1931). The song of Zuku Bajraktar, who is blinded by his mother along with his horse and subsequently becomes his mother's murderer—aptly termed the Albanian Oresteia—along with the legend of Dedalia, are unique narrative pieces in Albanian folklore that convey the killing of an elderly woman.

For scholars like Stavro Skendi, who studied Albanian and South Slavic epic traditions, the motifs in Zuku's song are strange and foreign to the Albanian narrative landscape, suggesting a Montenegrin epic origin (Skendi, 1954). Albanian customary law explicitly states: "Blood is owed for a finger, a priest's wife does not fall under blood feud laws. A woman is not subject to the Kanun, she is not to be touched, climbed on, nor is blood demanded or owed for her" (Gjeçovi, 1999).

The legend of "The Found Son" collected by the renowned researcher Kolë Shtjefni resonates closely with the well-known Greek mythology of Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother. This oral tale seems to originate early on, or at least concurrently with Albanian ballads of recognition and walling (Shtjefni, 1999).

This ancient narrative, devoid of any Christian elements, likely dates back to pagan times. It does not mention the influence of the Kanun or any specific temporal or spatial details, suggesting that this legend might be as old as the Greek myth of Oedipus itself, given the similar existential conditions of the Balkan peoples; it only differs in the element of recognition, which might have been added later when a morally acceptable resolution was sought. The essence of the tragedy lies in fate. Like Sophocles' tragedy, where Oedipus struggles to uncover his fate, the son in the Mirdita legend discovers his fate only when he realizes that fate has helped him avoid the grave sin of lying with his mother. However, unlike Oedipus, who becomes a perpetual slave to his fate because he consummated the sinful act of a "blind" marriage, the son in the Albanian oral tale does not punish himself with blinding or any other form, as in the Albanian mountaineer's judgment, the moral aspect weighs heavily; he might forgive blood but not shame, incest, sexual debauchery, or moral crime (Dedaj, 2021).

The Albanian legend, as an expression of the moral identity code, approaches sin but does not collapse to encompass the potential sinner because something salvational flies from the folds of conscience, a dove, a stream of blood, and instead of the tragedy, the miracle of recognition of mother and son occurs. Father Marin Sirdani writes that this oral tale was widespread throughout Dukagjin, bringing a variant that he collected in Pult, heard in two or three places. He calls it a fairy tale and titles it "Nama e Orës": "A man went to light in the mountains to cut some branches to make water troughs to sell, to earn a living. The village where he had his home was about six hours' walk from that place"... While working, he suddenly hears a woman's voice calling her companion. The man listens and thinks maybe that woman is a shepherdess who has lost her sheep and has gone out to find them at night. From the top of the opposite mountain responds another woman's voice, with a stronger and more pronounced squeal, which makes all the surrounding mountains echo: "Now we leave a son (mentions his name), how shall we assign his fate?" "To kill the Father and to take the Mother as a wife!" Just as the tragedy "Oedipus Rex" is fed by myth and legend, the Mirdita legend of The Found Son is of folkloric origin, but it comes as it was conceived, unrefined. Yet, it contains all the elements of the Oedipus complex, except for the final act, the consummation of the son's marriage to his mother. Here the legend deviates from this universal complex, maintaining the deeply Albanian color of the recognition motif, which is naturally known in other peoples of the Balkan region as well. The age of the legend must be ancient, from pagan times, as it does not mention elements of Christianity, the influence of the Kanun, nor does it contain temporal and spatial addresses. It is possible that this legend is contemporary with the Greek myth of Oedipus itself, as that was the way people in the Balkans thought under the same conditions; it is only distinguished by the recognition element, which may have been added later when a morally acceptable solution was sought. The tragic essence of fate is significant (Dedaj, 2021). As in Sophocles' tragedy, where Oedipus struggles to uncover his fate, the son in the Mirdita legend discovers his fate only when he realizes that fate has helped him avoid the grave sin of lying with his mother. However, unlike Oedipus, who becomes a perpetual slave to his fate because he consummated the sinful act of a "blind" marriage, the son in the Albanian oral tale does not punish himself with blinding or any other form, as in the Albanian mountaineer's judgment, the moral aspect weighs heavily; he might forgive blood but not shame, incest, sexual debauchery, or moral crime (Dedaj, 2021). The Albanian legend, as an expression of the moral identity code, approaches sin but does not collapse to encompass the potential sinner because something salvational flies from the folds of conscience, a dove, a stream of blood, and instead of the tragedy, the miracle of recognition of mother and son occurs. Father Marin Sirdani writes that this oral tale was widespread throughout Dukagjin, bringing a variant that he collected in Pult, heard in two or three places. He calls it a fairy tale and titles it 'Nama e Orës': 'A man went to light in the mountains to cut some branches to make water troughs to sell, to earn a living. The village where he had his home was about six hours' walk from that place'... While working, he suddenly hears a woman's voice calling her companion. The man listens and thinks maybe that woman is a shepherdess who has lost her sheep and has gone out to find them at night. From the top of the opposite mountain responds another woman's voice, with a stronger and more pronounced squeal, which makes all the surrounding mountains echo: 'Now we leave a son (mentions his name), how shall we assign his fate?' 'To kill the Father and to take the Mother as a wife!'

Richard Bauman's analysis of story, performance, and event highlights how the enactment of such tales in a communal setting "not only narrates a story but also performs a cultural function, reinforcing social norms and transmitting values through the very act of telling" (Bauman, 1986). The oral performance of this legend, especially in a community gathering,

transforms it from a mere narrative into a powerful cultural event that articulates complex social norms and personal emotions, engaging the listeners in a shared experience that reaffirms their cultural identity and moral values.

## **Conclusion**

The exploration of murder archetypes within Albanian oral narratives has unveiled profound layers of cultural symbolism and social implications embedded in these folkloric elements. These narratives act as mirrors, reflecting the historical and ethical paradigms that have shaped the collective consciousness of the Albanian people across centuries. By delving into such archetypes as sacrifice, fatality, and familial betrayal, this study underscores their crucial role in deciphering the moral and societal structures inherent in Albanian culture.

The persistent recurrence of these themes across generations underscores their enduring relevance and their role in navigating the complexities of human behavior within a cultural matrix. They encapsulate the perennial struggle between personal agency and fate, the tension between family loyalty and personal desires, and the profound acts of sacrifice made for communal stability. This research highlights the transcendent power of folklore, which influences laws, social norms, and the collective national identity far beyond mere storytelling.

As societies evolve, the timeless narratives of Albanian folklore continue to provide a valuable framework for interpreting contemporary issues through the lens of the past. The archetypes discussed not only enrich our understanding of Albanian cultural heritage but also offer a unique perspective on universal themes of justice, honor, and moral duty. Future research could explore how these narratives adapt in the context of modern pressures and global influences, potentially altering their form and function within the community.

In conclusion, the enduring legacy of these narratives continues to shape and inform the values and beliefs of the Albanian people, demonstrating the inextricable link between folklore and the molding of societal ethos. This study highlights the need for a deeper engagement with folklore studies to appreciate its profound impact on social and cultural dynamics.

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