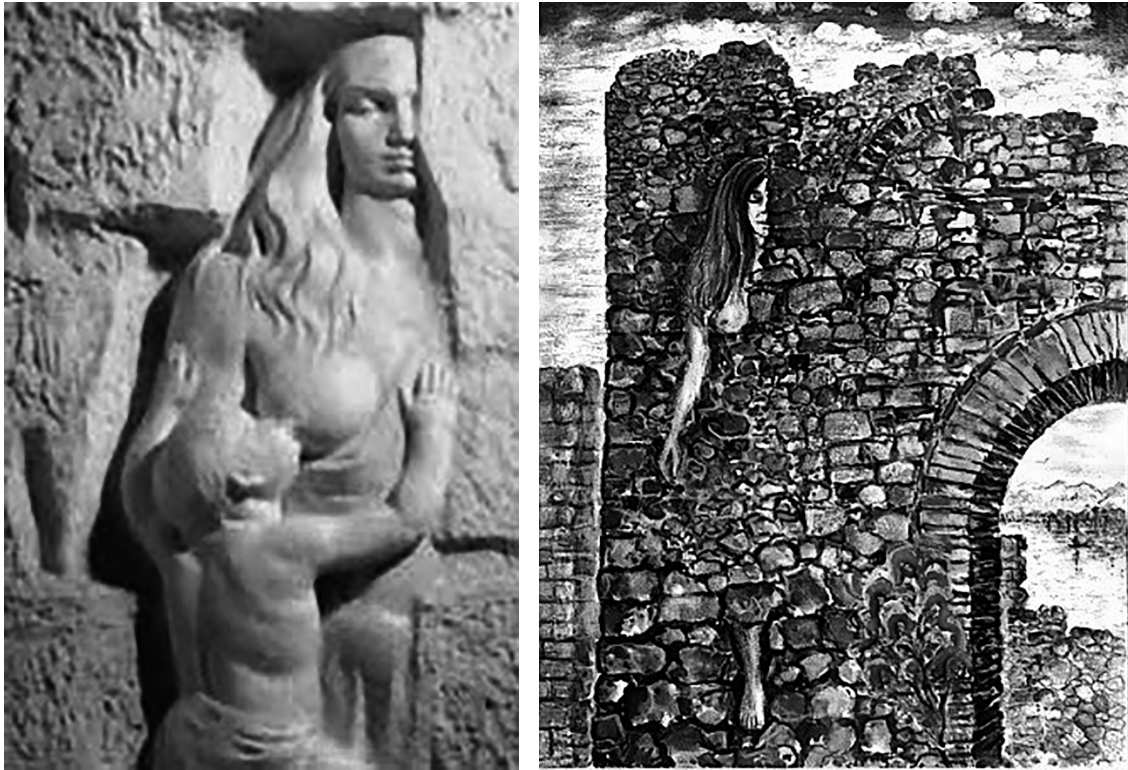


## **The Ballad of the Walled-Up Wife in the Vernacular Cultures of the Balkans: Revisiting Some Interpretations on the Question of its Authenticity**

**Arbnora Dushi**

The ballad of the walled-up wife, known also as ballad of immurement, is the ballad song based on the myth of a woman's sacrifice. It is a ballad with the theme of a woman who is walled-up in a bridge or a castle or a monastery to make the building stand. The ballad is very widespread, it has many variants and is still sung. It is also well researched and today we know many interpretations by researchers, not only from the Balkans and Europe, but also beyond. Known and described since the Grimm brothers as among the most beautiful folklore creations of all time (Dundes 2007, 110), its artistic value has not yet been exhausted. The Grimm brothers translated this song into German from the Serbo-Croatian version collected by Vuk Karadžić, "Zidanje Skadra" (The Building of Skadar) first published in 1825. When Goethe read it, he was shocked by the spirit of the song that he found superstitiously barbaric (Zimmerman 1979, 371–380). Since then, the ballad of immurement has continued to prompt and provoke new interpretations -- whether the story is about the pride of the man, the master mason who is measured against the supernatural forces by sacrificing his wife or about the woman who is victimized by the family and the society (Gega-Musa 2014, 293–303); or about the wall as a metaphor for the Balkan marriage, in which the woman is the one who has to sacrifice everything, from freedom of movement to her own life (Parpulova 1984, 425–439). Interpretations range from reading this ballad as foreshadowing Christianity, where the younger brother - the innocent one who is punished for the sins of others - is seen in analogy with the son of God who was sacrificed for humanity (Dundes 1989, 158), to reading it through psychoanalytic lenses, where the edifice that is built during the day and falls at night is seen as a metaphor for the male erection, which collapses at night when it is time for sexual relations, and therefore leads to the sacrifice of the woman to release this male caprice (Dundes 2007, 50). Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage (Gennep, 1960) finds application in the interpretation of this ballad when the act of walling is seen as a rite of passage from being a girl to becoming a woman at the moment of marriage, which is seen as a metaphor for the transformation of her life into an enclosure between walls, figuratively walling; leaving the breast outside is considered a metaphor for the only communication with the world, through the feeding and growth of children (Parpulova 1984, 429).

Works made by Albanian artists, represented below, make the act of sacrificing the woman's body on the wall visually clearer.



Both photos from: <https://anilakallesi.com/legjenda-e-rozafes/> (accessed: 11. 09. 2018)

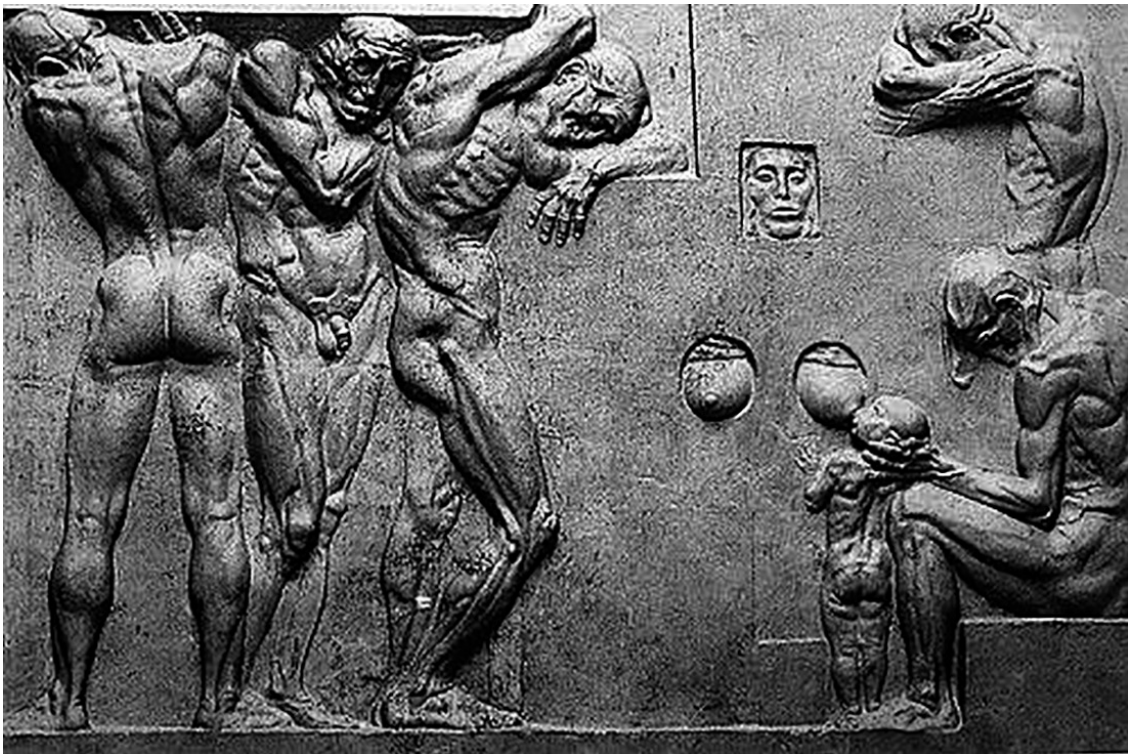


Photo from: <https://anilakallesi.com/legjenda-e-rozafes/> (accessed: 11. 09. 2018)





Photo from: <http://shkoder.net/rozafa-gruaja-murosur/> (accessed: 11. 09. 2018)

### **Revisiting the question of origin: geographical spread as a conflicting indicator**

Containing the myth that was created by the ritual of sacrifice, this ballad is regarded as an ancient oral or vernacular product, from the early periods of ancient beliefs, such as animism or the belief that nature has a soul and feelings as a young man. Human sacrifice in order to tame the spirit of nature was also found in ancient kingdoms when the rulers, in case of natural disasters or inability to rule successfully, sacrificed the most beloved family members (son, daughter, wife, sister), with in order to flatter the wild spirits of nature, whom they believed to be the cause of their misfortunes (Frazer 2009, 682–690). In the case of the ballad of immurement, the goal is to keep a castle or a bridge, built during the day but crumbled at night, standing. As the collapse of the edifice was attributed to an invisible spirit that was impossible to fight, the solution was believed to lie in the sacrifice of a precious thing, and this “thing” was nothing more nor less than a beloved human being. And this beloved being was “meant” to be the woman, the young bride, whose sacrifice had to be made to keep the work of the man, of a master or masters masons, standing.

This common origin has not precluded the varying interpretations of the ballad, as detailed above, nor has solved the still open and constantly provocative issue of the question

of its place of origin (Murtezani 2012, 29–47). Who created the walled-up ballad first? Which nation deserves the copyright for the creation of this oral type, so autochthonous and so ubiquitous at the same time? An issue like this has preoccupied and continues to preoccupy researchers of Balkan vernacular traditions, provoking debates without copyright solution, due to the continued politicization of ethnicities in the Balkans (Dundes 2007, 110), as Albanian writer Ismail Kadare says, the fight for the appropriation of folklore values in Balkans is no less bloody than the fight for territories (Kadare 1996, 91–102). Therefore, the interest in this issue continues to preoccupy us every time we come across new readings and interpretations.

Among the Albanian speaking-areas, the ballad of immurement is connected with many still standing medieval buildings, bridges, castles and monasteries. So far 150 variants of it have been recorded, with 90 variants referring to the construction of castles, and the rest to bridges (Sinani, 2006: 12). The ballad is spread in different parts of Albanian settlements. The oldest variant is the one that is associated to the Rozafa Castle of Shkodra (Scodra). Ismail Kadare identified three elements in the Albanian variants: 1) *Antiquity*, as the foundation of the city of Shkodra dates back to two or three centuries B.C., and it follows that the castle must have been built at that time; 2) the *Oath (Besa* in Albanian) that the brothers give to each other, even though the two older brothers break it, while the younger one keeps it, and this moral category is unique to the Albanian culture; and 3) *Density* - “in no other area of the Balkans is [this ballad] encountered as densely as in the Albanian lands, where it is sung about bridges, castles and monasteries” (according to: Zheji, 1998, 135).

In the northwestern part of the Albanian-speaking area, toponyms are usually associated with immurement in castles: (the castle of Shkodra, of Drishti, of Elbasan, os Turra, of Bashtova), while in the northeastern and southern parts, it is about immurement in bridges: the bridge of Fshejt-Gjakova (Kosovo), the bridge of Skiles, of Narta (both in Albania), the bridge of Tetovo (North Macedonia); immurement in monasteries in Albania: Pogradec district, some villages of Korça (Zheji 1998, 133). The most widespread variant among Albanian-speaking population is immurement in castles (the case of Shkodra Castle stands out), while the most limited is in churches and monasteries (Neziri, 2010, 72). Albanian researchers even say that the legend about the castle of Shkodra (Scodra, Scutari), the city known as an important cultural and political center of the Illyrians in the III-II centuries BC, is older than the one about the Adana bridge in Turkey (between 527–565 AD), than the one for the Arta bridge in Greece (built between 1602–1606), or the Argaidha bridge also in Greece (1659), also much older than the Serbian variant for the immurement in the Shkodra castle, which is based on the figures history of the three Mrljavčević brothers, tells about this construction in the 14th century (Neziri 2010, 72). In the Serbian version, the folk song contains names of historical persons who try to testify to the facts, but the other pagan and pre-Christian elements present deny its origin in this period, testifying to much earlier times

(Skendi 2007, 76). It is a bit strange why the medieval historian Marin Barleti, when he mentions the origin of the city of Shkodra, as well as the builders Roza and Fa, does not say anything about this ballad: “Some writings fell into our hands ... They were written there in the vernacular that a Roza with her sister named Fa were the first founders of Shkodra and therefore its fortress is called RozaFa” (Barleti 1967, 35). Perhaps as the researcher Shaban Sinani says, the reason for this was its pagan spirit, the pre-Christian material it contained, unacceptable for the church, (Sinani 1997, 84).

The Bulgarian-speaking ballad about the walled-up woman is associated with the construction of churches, bridges, houses and fountains (Milkova, 2005). 180 variants of the Bulgarian song have been recorded. Bulgarian researchers say that this song is Bulgarian as they have found traces of this ballad in Bulgarian wedding songs where “Bride in the castle” is sung in the sense of the ritual of separation from premarital life. This is considered as results in the symbolic demolition of the limiting walls, which case she is released and integrated into her new family. Just as the woman who is walled-up in the castle and becomes a block of the building to give strength to the house to stay further, the bride who enters the new family gives it strength to stay (Milkova 2005, 2).

Vuk Karadžić’s Serbian-speaking variant of this ballad is the oldest published version of it and, according to Serbian scholars, it is the first that archived its literary value, being published and translated into German as early as 1825 (Zimmerman 1979, 372). According to Karadžić, while in all other cultures this legend appears in the type of ballad, only for Serbs it is an epic poem and from here he derives the hypothesis that it was recorded as such by Serbian collectors after they used the motif of sacrifice to master the meaning of the epic. Serbs value their epic tradition as part of the data for the history of culture and therefore have recorded it as such, to document their history, with historical figures (Zimmerman 1979, 373).

For the North Macedonians, (except the Albanian-speaking variants of North Macedonia) the ballad “The bride of Strumica” which talks about the bridge over the river Struma that passes through the city of Strumica and is located in Eastern Macedonia, on the border with Bulgaria, the origin of the ballad of the walled-up wife is Macedonian. This assessment is based on the fact that the river and the bridge are located in North Macedonia. But there this ballad is part of the collection of “Bulgarian folk songs”, recorded by Bulgarian folklorists, the Miladinov brothers, and published in 1861 in Constanta (Bulgaria). It is recorded in the village of Kukush in Aegean Macedonia, which today is in Greece. Macedonians and Bulgarians say that that village is Macedonian, respectively Bulgarian. The dispute is also about the authors of this collection, Dimitar and Konstandi Miladinov, who called themselves Bulgarians, but were originally from Struga in North Macedonia (Murtezani 2012; Velaj 2020, 87–90).

Greek-speaking scholars claim that the oldest variant is theirs, for the Arta Bridge, which is a reflection of the ancient Hellenic cosmogony. The Greeks testify that they have

recorded 333 variants of this ballad. Some data say that it is from the time of the Roman Empire, and some others give the period of 1230–1271, the time of the Despotate of Epirus, as the date of its construction (Leontis 1999, 633–654). However, its finding on the river Arta, along the coastal area of northwestern Greece and southern Albania, which today continues to be inhabited by an Albanian population known as Chams, and is known as Chameria, is a convincing fact for Albanian researchers that it should be Albanian. The ballads with the motif of the immurement in Chameria, variants with more developed plots in terms of overall structure, are much closer to the variants of the North than to those of the Southern and Southeastern part of the Alban-speaking areas (Fetiu 2009, 161). Kadare and Zihni Sako share this attitude (according to: Murtezani 2012, 31). Velaj writes that the song of the walled woman is found throughout the Greek territory, who is impressed by the fact that it is preserved equally both in the interior of the country and on the border, even in isolated island areas, but also in the Greek diaspora in Asia Minor" (Velaj 2020, 115).

Evidence for the ballad of the wall also comes from the bridges of Višegrad in Bosnia, where it is said that after the Pascha walled-up his son at the foot of the bridge, his wife died from sorrow and was subsequently walled-up as well. The local peculiarities that are added to the ballad in question claim to prove its originality (Kropej 2011, 68).

Romanian-speaking scholars claim that this ballad is theirs since the most beautiful version is the one recorded in Transylvania. This version is related to the construction of the castle of Deva, the ruins of which still exist, and speaks of the burning of the body of the chief master Manole's bride and the burial of the ashes in the foundation of the castle. This variant has a different ending from the ones we know, since in the Romanian and Hungarian ballad, the son, realizing that his mother has been walled-up, goes to the castle and calls her, and when her voice answers him from the depth of the foundations, the boy's heart breaks and he dies next to the walls. Also, another very famous variant among Romanians is that of the monastery of Argesh, which, in addition to the walling of the woman, speaks of the death of the master after the construction of the monastery (Kropej 2011, 64).

The presence of this ballad in Romanian-speaking vernacular culture, as well as in Hungarian-speaking one, consequently its collection and publication by folklorists of the two respective countries, as Dundes writes, resulted in a lawsuit for plagiarism against the Hungarian researchers by the Romanian researchers. Of course, this has not been accepted as true by the court, being described as an intercultural influence (Dundes 2007, 113).

Considering the distinctive features of the immurement ballad which Balkan researchers mention to claim it as original to their ethnic group, we see that their arguments do not testify to rational judgment and logical conclusions. In this context, the most correct solution remains the proposal of Alan Dundes, who is considered to have done an exhaustive study on the issue of ethnocentrism in the evaluation of the ballad of the walled-up wife: the only possibility for a complete study and argumentation of the origin of this ballad remains the

publication and comparison of each of its variants (Dundes 2007, 118). Although many of the peoples of the Balkans have published all the variants of this ballad that they have found, there are others, like Albanians, who have not done it yet. Therefore, the lack of complete publication and translation of the variants of the Albanian ballad of the wall, as well as the lack of knowledge of the Albanian language, has caused many of the researchers, Balkan or not, to not recognize its artistic values (Murtezani 2012, 665).

The English anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon book, titled “The study of Man” (Haddon 1898, 275–287), which surprisingly is not mentioned by the folklorist Alan Dundes in his work (Dundes 1989, 2007), brings up legends of the wall related to various bridges in Europe including the London Bridge on the Thames. A folk game that is sung by girls, found in a village near Cambridge, but also in various parts of Ireland, talks about the London Bridge that did not stand until its walls were wet with the blood of children. Songs on human sacrifice to support bridges in the British Isles are found in Celtic folklore, respectively in Celtic countries, but also in Germany (Bridge in Halle), in Italy, in Holland, in India (Calcutta), as well as in Greece (Peloponnese) Turkey (Adana), France, Israel and other parts of Europe. The author who Haddon connects the folk song with the belief in the spirit of the waters, and in the variant found for the bridge of Adana (today in Turkey), which was recorded in Cappadocia, brings a special episode of this song sung in the Greek language. After Master Yiannaki drops his ring down the excavations and induces his wife to fetch it up, she while sinking sings the lamentation of her death:

Hear thou my words, Yiannaki mine, let not the world rejoice thee ;  
 Three only sisters once were we, we were three sisters only ;  
 The one did build the Danube’s bridge, the second the Euphrates’,  
 And I, I too, the murdered one, the bridge build of Adana.’

(Haddon 1898, 281).

This stanza of the walled-up wife ballads variant, provides information about its geographical distribution. Such an extension of the motif of sacrifice, if on one hand justifies the theory of polygenesis, according to which a folkloric item can be created simultaneously in many independent and unknown cultures (Dorson 1963, 93–112), on the other hand, it testifies to a mature folklore stage of unique creation, in which the cognitive stratifications are very evident. In fact, variants of the episode of this ballad song are also mentioned in Zihni Sako’s study on the Balkan motifs of the Albanian walled-up ballad. This Sako’s work is also referred by Alan Dundes, in his article on “Indian parallels for the walled-up wife ballad,” when he addresses the problem of narrow-minded traps of national folklore in the Balkans (Dundes, 2007: 112). Sako, who had a knowledge of variants in the Balkans and beyond, says that the episode with the three sisters walled-up in bridges is also known from



other sites, including the bridge of Arta (Greece), the bridge of Gallata (Turkey), the Nigrita bridge (Macedonia), the Tërnovo bridge (Bulgaria) and other bridges in Serbia and Greece (Sako 1984, 159). Sako, who was preoccupied with proving the authenticity of the Albanian ballad, knew well the published variants as well as the studies on this ballad by most of Balkan and European authors, and testified on the antiquity and authenticity of the Albanian ballad on the Rozafa fortress in Shkodër. In this city known since the time of the Illyrians in the 7th century BC, whose flourishing is known in the 3rd century BC, is found archaeological evidence of child sacrifices, which Sako wrote must have influenced the ballad of sacrifice of the Rozafat castle. As such he proves that the Ballad on Rozafa castle immurement is older than that of the ancient stone bridge at Adana, today in Turkey, which was built no earlier than 527–565 AD and is said to have required the walling of a man. Non-Albanian researchers' lack of knowledge of the Albanian language, as well as the non-translation of Albanian songs, have left these variants unknown to foreigners and thus unappreciated (Sako, 1984: 163–164). Although the historical records on the construction of the Adana Bridge today in modern Turkey lead to the 1st-2nd centuries AD, when it is said to the Roman emperor Hadrian built it as the oldest bridge in the world, the folk songs that related to its construction are not in Turkish, but in Greek, like the variant recorded in Cappadocia (Haddon 1898, 281).

The matter of the origin of the ballad of sacrifice becomes even more complicated when we understand the publication of Francis Hinds Groom in 1899, who brought a variant of this song found and recorded by nomadic Roma from India. This ballad, which was known as “Seven brothers and one sister”, was about the effort of seven bricklayer brothers to build a well, from which, despite daily digging, no water came out. The sacrifice takes place, after a *yogi* advises the mason brothers to put their only sister into the well, that is, to give her to the spirit of the well. When the well fills with water, the sister is flooded. Groom has said that the Balkan masons were usually Roma, and they came from India and brought with them the Hindu ballad (according to Owen Jones, 1967: 71–80). This theory is also defended by the American researcher Alan Dundes, who found the ballad of the wall in India as well, and said that in both India and the Balkan there is a spirited fight among scholars to appropriate this ballad. Describing this ballad as one of the most famous in the world, Dundes confirms the existence of 700 variants in the Balkans and says that its origin is not from the Balkans, but of Indo-European origin, and this fact is implied by the arrival of the Aryans from India to the Balkans, in which case they brought with them myths and folklore (Dundes 2007, 110–122).

Researchers have tried to explain the problem of the presence of types of folklore with common components in different cultures according to the evolutionary theory, i.e. the general evolution of social development in all fields, specifically in the sphere of mythology, folklore and in general of spiritual living as well as the creation of certain moral norms of similar social formations (Fetiu 2000; Fetiu 2009, 153). In line with this is the theory of polygenesis,



according to which there are many ballads of immurement in the Balkans, as the rite and belief of human sacrifice to support certain buildings existed among all cultures. In this sense, it was believed that for the building to last, it had to be animated (made with a soul), that is, take on a life and a soul at the same time. Bringing the soul into this work was only possible through human sacrifice, through a violent death. In Balkan cultures, the belief prevailed that the house, the building, until it is built, “eats a man,” in the sense that it takes a life, it requires effort and sacrifice and as the superstition goes today, the blood, the head of a ram or any other animal must be poured into the foundations of the house, a practice which has its origin in the sacrifice of another soul, to save the life of the owner of the house (Tirta 2004, 356).

### **Ballad of immurement as a symbol of communication or isolation**

The ballad is known to Albanians as “Rozafati” and “Bridge of Fshejt”, to the Greeks as “Bridge of Arta”, to the Serbs “The Building of Skadar”, to the Bulgarian-Macedonians as “The bride of Struma”, to the Romanians as “Master Manole”, and to the Hungarians as “Mason Clement”. It is also found among the Jews of Kurdistan, although it is said to be a Balkan variant but adapted and enriched with expressions within the contours of Jewish tradition and lifestyle (Shai, 1976: 303), as “Nemo Delale”. In the Neo-Aramaic language Nemo Delale means “Nemo’s beloved”, the daughter of the master craftsman, who sacrifices her for the castle to stand, following a voice from the cave. The ballad relates to the construction of the castle of Zakho, a town in the Iraqi sector of Kurdistan that was inhabited by Jews who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s (Shai 1976, 306).

Each Balkan variant of this ballad testifies to the ethnic characteristics of the area where it was found and recorded. Ethnic and ethno-psychological features of the people who sang it have characterized each variant, making it special, and testifying to its originality. However, while on the one hand the distribution of the ballad in the Balkans has created a struggle for its appropriation among ethnic groups, on the other hand, its local character and connection to concrete historical objects, as well as its ethnic colors, have managed to preserve and saving it from extinction. Here we can refer to the words of Zimmerman who said that if the ballad came from India, it was in the Balkans that it was preserved (Zimmerman, 1979, 371–380).

Although Dundes does not forgive the Balkan researchers of this ballad for their nationalistic appetites, it is worth paying attention to the special colors they give to their theories of origin. The peoples of the Balkans have historically lived very close to each other, thus sharing a small geographical space, and enjoying either friendly or hostile relations with their neighbors. The struggle for the conquest of one neighbor’s territories as well as for the protection from another has affected the construction of the castle, which is a symbol

of protection and isolation. On the other hand, open communication with one's neighbor has required openness and coexistence, thus favoring the construction of a bridge. From the point of view of the historical-geographical method, the great spread of this ballad in the Balkans is also explained through the metaphor of the bridge, where the Balkans itself is seen as a bridge that connects Europe and Asia, respectively the West and the East (Velaj, 2020, 76).

By various researchers the Balkan neighborhood has also been seen as the reason why the constructions based on human sacrifice in the Balkans have always been connected with castles or bridges, rarely with monasteries, but not with wells as in India. The castle is seen as a symbol of isolation, while the bridge as a symbol of communication and these two buildings are divided in the symbolic relationship between: coexistence - conflict; communication - isolation, cooperation - separation. Consequently, Balkan coexistence has always developed between a bridge and a castle, solutions that have been conditioned by the neighborhood as well as the complicated historical circumstances (Sinani, 1997, 81).

The distribution of this ballad throughout the Albanian territory deserves a particular mention. Ismail Kadare noticed that while songs about the sacrifice on the bridges are recorded in the Eastern, Central and Southern regions of Albania, the Northwestern area up to the coast is known only for the songs of the castles. As the castles are on the Western side, while the bridges are on the Eastern side, and almost no castle at all on the southern borders, it appears that danger for Albania came from its western coast (according to: Sinani 1997, 87).

Albanian folklore scholar Shaban Sinani has further elaborated Kadare's observations by remarking that the areas near the sea have been more populated and more urban, and that the castle, besides being a symbol of stability, is also a symbol of a population that feels permanent, connected to their ancestral land; they are not nomads in those lands. But Sinani notices also that the motif of the wall is connected with a castle mainly among those peoples of the Balkans, including the Albanians, who have traditionally been subjected to the loss of territories. On the contrary, the motif of the bridge is more pronounced among the peoples who have dominated this part of Europe, sometimes through imperial institutions, sometimes through cultural influence, sometimes through massive migration or sometimes through wars and violence (Sinani 1997, 85).

The dilemmas of the Balkan peoples, between a bridge and a castle, as well as their vernacular culture, appear also in literature. The motif of the ballad of the wall has inspired the greatest authors of the Balkans who have created great literary works (Dushi, 2004). Among the most popular are: Nikos Kazantzakis "The Master" (1910), Mircea Eliade "Comments on the legend of the master Manole" (1943), Ivo Andric "The Bridge on the Drina"(1945), Ismail Kadare "Three arched bridge" (1975), and Rexhep Qosja "Beselam why they sacrifice me" (1978).

In conclusion, we can emphasize that the idea of the Balkan neighborhood has played a

big role in the cultures of the Balkans, and much greater than the search for authenticity. As Sinani says, the similarities that we find today in the folklore creations of these peoples are the result of long coexistence. The very presence of the same motives testifies to neighborly relations, while this very neighborliness has influenced the jealous preservation of special, ethnic features, feeding an instinct of self-defense against the threat of neighbors (Sinani, 2006, 39). Consequently, the existence of continuous and often contradictory interpretations of legends and ballads, especially regarding the origin of the ballad of immurement, instead of dividing folklorists, should unite them around one position: the full acceptance of the presence of many interpretations of folkloric types and the presence of many variants, as Dundes has suggested “Folklorists must accustom themselves to accepting multiple interpretations just as they have learned to accept the existence of multiple versions of texts” (Dundes 2007, 119). More than the poverty of thoughts, interpretations, even when charged with nationalism, should be seen as wealth. The publication and translation into English of all the Balkan variants would also be helped by a contemporaneous translation of all the interpretations.

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The Ballad of the Walled-Up Wife in the Vernacular Cultures of the Balkans:  
Revisiting Some Interpretations on the Question of its Authenticity

by

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The folk ballad on the theme of sacrifice is considered one of the pearls of vernacular traditions. Despite its early presence among folk cultures it continues, still today, to preoccupy folklorists as well as researchers in the literary field. Its presence in the vernacular traditions of many Balkan cultures is connected with many known legends about buildings. The presence of a multitude of variants of this ballad has encouraged local researchers to seek, according to the theory of monogenesis, its autochthonous version, the version of its putative native culture. Such an approach has been criticized by non-Balkan scholars, who have proven the origin of this ballad entirely outside the Balkan territory. What is the true origin of this ballad? What does the evidence from the field say? From where comes the interpretation of its authenticity? Having collected some of the interpretations about the origin of this ballad, I will address the complexity of the origin of this folk creation.

**Keywords:** ballads, Balkan, Albanian, sacrifice, myth, authenticity