



Ismail Kadare's Usage of Myth in Comprehending Albania's National Condition

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ABSTRACT

Albania is a small country located in the Balkan peninsula on the Adriatic coast. Its complicated political history and a cultural identity that straddles European and Asian makes the nation an interesting subject for analysis based on national identity structures. Additionally, the nation has a rich oral tradition and often claims to have been the birthplace of Homeric poetry. Literature from this nation, however, is neither widely read nor available. The only Albanian literary export of note is Ismail Kadare who was awarded the inaugural Man Booker International Prize for his entire body of work and his efforts to bring Albanian culture to the global masses. Kadare's writing style involves creating alternate historical timelines, extensive usage of allegory and, most significantly for this collection, the usage, re-usage and, sometimes, reconstruction of Balkan myths.

This essay will analyse how Kadare uses myths in order to make sense of the national condition of Albania from the beginning of World War II until the early 2000s when Albania began its process of recuperating from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Indeed, this is not Kadare's only motivation for writing. He also intends to develop a new Albanian identity that is separate from its Ottoman history. Albania was an Ottoman colony for over four centuries and was subsequently occupied and influenced – culturally and economically – by new geopolitical powers in Eastern Europe such as Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia. In his novels, Kadare re-contextualises myths to allegorically critique these foreign powers as well as native politicians. In doing so, he attempts to show the purity and nobility of authentic Albanian culture despite its inherent atavism.

KEYWORDS

Mythology, national myths, Albania, Ismail Kadare, national identity.

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This essay will analyse how Kadare uses myths in order to make sense of the national condition of Albania from the beginning of World War II until the early 2000s when Albania began its process of recuperating from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Indeed, this is not Kadare's only motivation for writing. He also intends to develop a new Albanian identity that is separate from its Ottoman history. Albania was an Ottoman colony for over four centuries and was subsequently occupied and influenced – culturally and economically – by new geopolitical powers in Eastern Europe such as Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia. In his novels, Kadare re-contextualises myths to allegorically critique these foreign powers as well as native politicians. In doing so, he attempts to show the purity and nobility of authentic Albanian culture despite its inherent atavism. Particular attention will be given to three specific novels, namely *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), *The Three-arched Bridge* (1978) and *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* (2000) as these provide a good cross-section of Kadare's depiction of Albanian culture in post-War times.

A Brief History of Albania

Albanians trace their identity back to the “Illyrian tribesmen” who lived in a similar geographical region. They were occupied consecutively by the Greeks, the Romans and the Byzantines. Indeed, the region was conquered by the Ottomans in 1478 along with most of the Balkans. The Albanians remained colonised by the Ottomans for over a century and only achieved independence in 1912. This was followed by a period of turbulent autonomy as a republic and then as a sort of kingdom under the stewardship of the self-styled King Zog I. After this came occupation by Fascist Italy during the Second World War. Then, following a brief civil war, communist partisans established the People's Republic of Albania and placed the would-be dictator Enver Hoxha at the head of the nation. The next few decades Albania spent as satellites of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Maoist China. After breaking off relations with China in

1978, Hoxha plunged Albania into a decade of isolation until his death and the eventual collapse of European communism in the 1990s (Cameron).

As mentioned above, Albania began the twentieth century as a colony of the Ottoman Empire; Consequently, in 1913, much as would happen with the former colonies of European maritime empires throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, external "major powers drew blunt pencil lines over a map of the Balkans...[which]...left as many Albanians outside the new country's borders as within them" (Hall 161). In 1918, some parts of Macedonia and all of Kosovo became part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes which was later to become Yugoslavia. During this time, the largely Muslim Albanians in these territories were not recognised as a separate nation and there were efforts to Slavicize the Albanian Islamic institutions. These efforts were to essentially de-Islamicise the Albanians not with the intention to eliminate the effects of Ottoman colonisation but to assimilate them into the distinctly Christian Yugoslav Kingdom despite significant opposition (Babuna 68).

At the same time, Albania became a monarchy in 1928 when the tribal chieftain Ahmet Zogu declared himself king (Ahmetaj 208). He, however, disappeared seeking refuge in Britain and other Western nations as soon as Fascist Italy invaded at the beginning of the Second World War (Hall 161-2). Albania remained part of the Italian Empire nominally under Victor Emmanuel III till the end of the war when it became a dependency of Yugoslavia. By this time, Enver Hoxha was already Prime Minister of Albania after the victory of the communist partisans in the Albanian civil war. As Tito and Stalin differed in their ideas of socialism, Hoxha sided with the latter and paved the way for Albania to become a Soviet satellite which it remained so until 1961. Khrushchev's attempt to bring Tito back on side threatened to undermine Hoxha's position in Albania and, therefore, Hoxha sought new patrons in Maoist China. However, as China's policy towards the United States changed and it became more open, Hoxha decided once again to break relations with Albania's more powerful ally. This time, with no other options left, Hoxha chose to isolate Albania from the rest of the world and pursue a programme of staunch Stalinism (Larrabee 62; Hall 162-3).

The Importance of Myth in Nation-building

Among ethnic communities and socio-cultural groups created after cataclysmic events such as the World Wars there is an almost Oedipus-like desire to locate and establish their origins. Often these origins are established through myth or mythologization of history. Myths of ancestry and national foundation are common in Africa and Asia. The story of the foundation of Rome also falls into this category. However, when it comes to modern mythmaking, nationalism became a central trope. National ethnic identities are established through myths of descent.

By placing the present in the context of the past and of the community, the myth of descent interprets present social changes and collective endeavours in a manner that satisfies the drive for meaning by providing new identities that seem to be also very old, and restoring locations, social and territorial, that allegedly were the crucibles of those identities. (Smith 62)

A 20th century champion of the *Rilindja* Movement or the Albanian National Awakening, Ismail Kadare promotes the idea that Albania was “an initial ground of Western European civilization” (Sulstarova 395). This is a continuation of the long-established concept of Albanianism which purportedly defines Albanian culture above all its linguistic, geographical and religious divisions.

The aforementioned concept of Albanianism was propounded by Pashko Vasa, an Albanian functionary of the Ottoman Empire, who was also an ethnographer, folklorist and nationalist. His sole purpose, and that of Kadare, in constructing such an origin story was to establish the Albanians as a people who should be recognised within Europe. Vasa places the Albanians into a category of people “whose origin goes back to mythological times” (Bayraktar 3), more specifically the times of the Pelasgians, who were the predecessors of the Ancient Greeks, and the Illyrians, who were contemporaries of the Ancient Greeks. Although his brand of nationalism mostly called for more autonomy for Albania but within the Ottoman Empire (Bayraktar 3), he paved the way for the Albanian revival or reawakening and influenced contemporary and later Albanian nationalists who pioneered the *Rilindja* movement. From among them, Sami Frasheri, and, perhaps more so, his brother, Naim, were significant influences on Kadare.

Ismail Kadare is well aware of the power that literature possesses in influencing collective memory. This is why he chooses to write historical novels mythologising and mythifying the past where necessary. Indeed, he makes extensive use of Albanian myths and folklore in his novels as plot points as well as to amplify Albania’s ancient culture. This is a not uncommon practice among nationalists attempting to reconstruct their nation’s identities by “sacralising the land as national territory” (Abrahams 4). “Both the lore and the folk became useful to those who sought to augment the cultural value of the land” (Weiner, qtd. in Abrahams 4). Nationalism is thus directly linked to the land it grows on and requires its physical existence to continue to strengthen. This is where folklore becomes important.

Mythification of the nation, its people and its culture is a way of “organising history so as to make sense of it for that particular community” (Schopflin qtd. in Bayraktar 5). This organisation of history is exactly what Keith Jenkins was referring to when he wrote: “History is never for itself; it is always for someone” (21). Vasa was doing this to specifically give Albania

an identity of its own separate from the Greeks and the Serbs. However, this recourse to myth is significant for this thesis as “a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english” (Ashcroft et al 9).

Myth and mythmaking in Kadare's Novels

Ismail Kadare first began writing in the 1950s just as a new Albanian literary scene began to emerge after the post-War Communist reprisals. Hoxha can be given some credit in nurturing this scene although soon he would be imposing severe restrictions on its freedoms. Having lived through the Second World War as a child in Gjirokaster, the hometown he shared with his country's dictator Hoxha, Kadare only knew an Albania that was either occupied by or under the strong influence of a foreign power (Morgan 36-37). Yet, he was also acutely aware of Albania's own rich culture as is evidenced by the importance it is given in almost all of his novels but especially the three chosen for analysis in this essay. Incidentally, Kadare was chosen to study at the Gorky Institute in Moscow where he spent two years between 1958 and 1960. There he was taught the tenets of socialist realism but he refused to be indoctrinated and, in fact, outright stated that the experience only taught him “how not to write” (Bellos vii).

— 30 — All of these factors – cultural, social, political, historical and, even, academic – were actively influencing Kadare as he began his writing career (Morgan 108). For a writer of his ability, the ground was thus fertile to develop a writing style that was unique yet, as the Man Booker International prize ratified, universal and relevant. Indeed, it is in order to make his writing more accessible to and easier to identify with for the Albanian public Kadare makes extensive use of Balkan mythology in his novels. The novels chosen for this paper as mentioned earlier are *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), *The Three-arched Bridge* (1978) and *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* (2000). The first of these novels shows how Kadare mythifies the Albanian people and culture; the second shows how native myths influence the population and how they can be manipulated to meet the nefarious ends of hostile foreign powers; and the third shows how these myths are incongruous with Albania's march towards modernity and yet still define Albanian national and cultural identity.

The General of the Dead Army is Kadare's “first major prose work” and is a process of “re-cuperation of history in the service of national identity itself” (Weitzman 283). The title itself gives us a sense of unreality and opens up the realms of myth and myth-making. The plot is a fictional depiction of the repatriation of the corpses of Italian soldiers who had lost their lives on Albanian soil during the Second World War. These missions took place in the 1960s and later. This novel follows a nameless Italian general and an equally nameless Italian priest who travel around the Albanian countryside looking for the graves of Italian soldiers, exhuming and

identifying them, so that they can be taken back to their homelands and given a proper, perhaps more respectful, burial. Through the general's interaction with the natives and posthumous testimonies of Italian soldiers found in their diaries, the true impact of the war on Albanian lives is laid bare.

Kadare establishes the atmosphere of this novel very early. The rain and the mud that will dominate the story are present in the first paragraph itself. Indeed, the impenetrable and hostile nature of the "foreign soil" is established right at the beginning (*The General* 3). This immediately exoticises Albania. The descriptions of the weather, the mountains, the people, etc. place the nation at par with the Orient of imperial Europe. The urban modernity of Tirana that is occasionally visible in the novel seems out of place. The Albanian rural landscape is omnipresent and its hostility constantly restated. The hostility of the Albanians themselves is also ever present. Although, for the most part, everyone is co-operative, there is ample evidence that the general and the priest were seen with suspicion.

Since the novel is told from the perspective of the Italians, the mythification is laced with orientalism. Discussing the fighting ability of the Albanians, the general says they are "[m]en just like anyone else. You would never believe that in battle they would turn into wild beasts" (Kadare, *The General* 23). The priest later remarks that this savagery was "ingrained in their psychology" (Kadare, *The General* 27). He explains that the Albanians possess "an atavistic instinct [which] drives them into war" and once they have begun fighting "there is no limit to how far they are prepared to go." Indeed, he further suggests that the Albanian nature "requires war" and that, during peacetime, "the Albanian becomes sluggish and only half alive, like a snake in winter" (Kadare, *The General* 28).

The most significant aspect of Albanian culture, and one that dominates much of Kadare's novels, which is used to mythify the people is the ancient code of honour known as the Kanun. The priest becomes a vessel for Kadare's own musings regarding the feasibility of the Kanun and its ancient traditions in the modern world. The priest discusses the concept of the vendetta with near academic rigour. He invokes an Oscar Wilde epigram which states that "the lower classes feel a need to commit crimes in order to experience the strong emotions that we can derive from art." He suggests that "crimes" could be substituted for "war" or "vengeance" as he understands that "the Albanians are not criminals in the common law sense." All of their murders are in conformity with the Kanun and, therefore, entirely legal. He envisions the Albanian highlanders as living out roles in a tragic play set in the inhospitable environment of "the plateaux or the mountains" where death comes to them inevitably if not brought by the harsh conditions, then by "an imprudent remark, a joke that went a little too far, or a covetous glance at a woman." He also asserts that often vendettas have no passion attached but are simply the

results of “obeying a clause of unwritten law” (Kadare, *The General* 134-5). The general muses that perhaps the psychotic desire for violence among the Albanians might be a result of their history of invasion, occupation and oppression. Once again, he likens them to animals. This time it is one which when threatened goes into “a state of immobility in a state of extreme tension, muscles coiled, every sense on the alert” before retaliating (Kadare, *The General* 136).

Although these comparisons are, superficially, demeaning to the Albanians, the reader cannot help but be attracted to them. The condescending and brash tones of the priest and the general respectively ensure that sympathy for the Albanians is aroused. The comparisons to animals are intended to remove the Albanians from the realm of the human. Furthermore, the discussion of the Kanun paints a picture of an ancient peoples living under a similarly ancient legal framework and nobly remaining faithful to it even as it leaves a trail of blood in its wake. This is only one half of the mythifying process. Having removed the Albanians from the realm of humanity, he then seeks to elevate them above it.

This is done by the story of Nik Martini who tried to defend an entire beachhead by himself. Nik Martini was merely a “peasant from the mountains” yet his exploits had become stuff of legend. “He fought in four different places that day, until he had no strength in him left to fight.” This lone sniper had become endowed with nearly magical powers as he moved swiftly from outcrop to outcrop and even escaped shelling from a mortar. Only when his ammunition had run out and “lorryloads of soldiers [were] still driving past towards Tirana” did he begin to “howl with grief”, was heard by the Italian soldiers who “tore him to pieces with their daggers.” Yet, this hero has no grave but “only a song to keep his memory alive.” Thus, Nik becomes a mythical figure representing the thousands of Albanian peasants who fought against extreme odds and were killed during the Italian invasion. He is almost an avatar of the great Albanian mytho-historical hero, Skanderbeg, who tried to re-establish the nation of Albania by single-handedly rebelling against the Ottomans in the 15th century. Much like Skanderbeg, Nik Martini is a folk hero. It is possible that the story is older or, perhaps, the exploits of multiple men put together, as some of the locals argued. However, the core of the myth is ancient: “the trunk goes back a long way” (Kadare, *The General* 154-55).

Essentially, the myth of the lone hero has been transformed to make sense of the contemporary condition and also to inspire others to commit similar heroic deeds. This type of myth formation is important for the nation as it helps in building a community. Kali Tal in her book *Words of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (1996), states that individual memories of trauma when told and re-told in various manifestations “enter the vocabulary of the larger culture where they become tools for the construction of national myths” (Radstone 142). Furthermore, myths allow for a “rejection of historicity” and a creation of the “past in the

present” through rituals and cultural symbols (Wawrzyniak and Lewis 23). In this case, the cultural symbol is the image of the Albanian mountaineer defending his land with only his rifle and his honour. This sense of honour is significant in engendering a unified national identity. It had driven Albanian men from their mountainous homes to the coast to fight the invading forces. “They came from considerable distances, without anyone having organised them.” It was as if “something very ancient...like an instinct” drove them towards the sea. These men were “not even concerned to know what country it was now assailing them.” They were united through this ancient instinct into one national body and were simply aware they needed to fight (Kadare, *The General* 156-7). It is to facilitate such unified action that national myths exist, especially myths about lone fighters such as Nik Martini.

In *The Three-arched Bridge*, Kadare reconstructs an already existing Albanian myth to create the central plot point. He reuses the myth of Rozafa’s Castle but changes some key points to adapt it to his story. In the original myth, three brothers were building a castle at Shkoder, in northwest Albania. One of the walls would be destroyed overnight. No matter how many times they re-built it, the wall kept on collapsing. They were made aware that this was the work of angered spirits of the land from whom permission had not been sought before beginning construction. The only solution was to immure someone within the wall and build it around them. It had to be one of the wives of the three brothers. They decide that whoever’s wife brings their lunch the next morning will be the chosen victim. They swear not to tell their wives about this pact. But the two elder brothers do while only the youngest one does not. So, the next day, the wives of the elder brothers feign discomfort and refuse to take lunch to the man. Rozafa, the youngest brother’s wife, happily volunteers and is walled up. There would be no more issues with construction and the castle stands to this day (Gould 211).

For Albanians, this tale teaches the lesson of the *besa*, the given word of honour, which must never be broken and “that all labour, and every major task, requires some kind of sacrifice” (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 84, 89). Rozafa’s ultimate acceptance of her victimhood and the resulting success of the construction bears out the second lesson. The first lesson, however, is slightly tenuous. The castle was being built to protect the city of Shkoder and, being close to the northern border, to protect the rest of Albania as well. While the youngest brother remained true to his word, the elder brothers did not wish to make such an extreme sacrifice and were willing to betray their country to protect their wives (Raymond 63). In the novel, Kadare replaces the castle with a bridge which would be the site of the first incursion of the imminent Ottoman invasion of Albania (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 165).

The story is set sometime in the 14th century. With the Ottoman invasion imminent, a foreign company, ostensibly named “Roads and Bridges” sends envoys to the local count with a

proposal to build a bridge over the *Ujana e Keqe*, the dangerous river that flows through the area (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 11-12). However, some of the locals are not in favour of building the bridge and one man named Murrash Zenebisha single-handedly attempts to destroy the bridge. Here, we again have the motif of the lone folk hero trying to defend his home and culture. Every night Murrash would swim underwater and cause tremendous damage to the bridge. He wants to put the fear of the supernatural in the hearts of the builders. Just as he manipulates the Rozafa myth for his own ends, the construction company uses the same myth to turn the tables against him.

“Roads and Bridges” claimed that “Ferries and Rafts”, the company whose ferry service the bridge would render obsolete had “[w]ith the help of paid bards, ...spread the myth that the spirits of the water will not tolerate the bridge and that it must be destroyed” (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 73). In retaliation, “Roads and Bridges” sent out bards of their own who sang the ballad of the three masons essentially reminding people that the problem of spirits damaging the bridge could easily be solved through a foundation sacrifice or immurement. Indeed, they even offer a reward for anyone willing to be voluntarily sacrificed (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 96, 100). Murrash is identified as the culprit and is punished by being sacrificed as the ostensible victim. Therefore, Murrash, who was playing the role of the spirits of the water, the supernatural representatives of local culture, is himself sacrificed. Thus, this sacrifice becomes an abomination. The death of Murrash was a result of the struggle between two foreign powers to impose their dominance on Albanian soil and, in the midst of it, it was Albania itself that was unfairly sacrificed.

This is an even bigger tragedy for Kadare who maintains that Albania, along with Greece, is the birthplace of Western civilisation. Jonathan Friedman writes that “the formation of Greek national identity consists in the internalization of the way in which Western European intellectuals, in constructing their own ‘civilized’ origins, identified Greece” (196). By equating Albania with the Greeks and, indeed, superseding them, Kadare wishes to establish his nation as *the* origin of Western civilisation. He does this in *The Three-arched Bridge* by way of a conversation between his narrator, the monk Gjon, and another monk named Brockhardt. The narrator claims that the Albanians’ language was older than Greek and it “was proved by the words the Greek had borrowed from [their] tongue.” Indeed, it was “the names of gods and heroes” such as “‘Zeus’, ‘Dhemetra’, ‘Teris’, and ‘Odhise’, and ‘Kaos’, according to [their] monks, stemmed from the Albanian words *zë*, for ‘voice’, *dhe* for ‘earth’, *det* for ‘sea’, *udhë* for ‘journey’, and *haes* for ‘eater’” (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 66).

“Mythical incidents constitute archetypal situations” (Sahlins 14). Therefore, they provide a framework for those in the real world to comprehend similar situations. The great catalogue of

Albanian myths available to Kadare provides him with the best avenue to help his nation come to terms with its reality. Kadare wrote *The Three-arched Bridge* as the relations between Albania and China had begun to worsen, 1976-78, leaving Albania on the cusp of being without any significant political and financial backing to facilitate its development. This is the major cause of the palpable anxiety that pervades the novel. The walling up of Murrash is an allegory for the impending isolation of Albania. It is “a perverse pregnancy” and quite contrary to the *Rilindja* claims of civilisational origin this walling up will not give birth to anything fruitful. If anything, it will work in reverse and cause the decay of the national foetus. Within the novel, it is the story of Rozafa that helps to comprehend the events of the fictional reality. In Kadare’s contemporary world, his reconstruction of the myth was meant to help his readers comprehend what was about to happen to them. Soviet Russia – “Ferries and Rafts” – had been a familiar exploitative foreign agent while Maoist China – “Roads and Bridges” – brought with it greater modernisation but was also a far more sinister and inscrutable force to reckon with. Now that this latter force was distancing itself from Albania, the nation would be left at the mercy of its Ottoman legacy and ancient customs.

Through this reconstruction of the original myth, Kadare reaches the heart of the instability that has plagued Albania for centuries. The novel, and the original myth, “celebrate the self-sacrificial patriotism of Rozafa, Murrash and Gjon [the novel’s narrator who feels he must sacrifice himself in chronicling the events], they also expose the self-serving lies that compromise the integrity of their castles, walls and country” (Raymond 65). Kadare has a character, ostensibly an agent of “Roads and Bridges”, remark that “all great building works resemble crimes” (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 87). This includes building of nations and in such cases the “call of duty to a higher ideal ... is of such urgency murder and even the murder of kin by one’s own hand become acceptable.” The woman’s death “precludes the death of innocent children” whom the castle will protect from invaders (Aleksic 3). Thus, Kadare portrays the nobility of Albanians in their willingness to make sacrifices for the supposedly greater good. At the same time, the readers are reminded of the fallibility of human nature and the particular propensity for breaking the *besa*.

This dual Albanian nature is further explored in *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* which, being written long after the end of Communism, allowed Kadare greater room to write more critically about the Albanian people, culture and history. This novel explores the relevance of the myth of the snake husband. A woman is married off to a snake as a punishment for an offence “the girl’s family or clan had committed” which “no one could remember.” Yet, she shows no signs of unhappiness. It is revealed that the snake is actually a man who would appear every night, make love to his bride and as soon as morning came would climb back into his snake-suit

and resume a reptilian life. However, one night, wanting make her husband's metamorphosis permanent, the young woman burns the snake suit. This causes "the young man [to fade] away before his bride's eyes, and then [to vanish] entirely, and for ever." The husband explains that he had been "sentenced to spending three-quarters of [his] life in the form of a snake." This means he could only "live as a man for only one-quarter of the time" and that he shall faithfully return to his reptilian form afterwards, without fail. The destruction of the snake suit amounts to a breaking of this faith and, therefore, destroys him completely (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 13-31).

Kadare chooses this myth as a counterfoil to the socio-cultural conditions of post-communism Albania. This was a time when Albania was once again struggling to find its identity that did not include its former Stalinist isolationism. This post-Hoxha search for a new identity led to a renewed enthusiasm for religious identity and a resurgence of the Kanun with its accompanying honour killings (de Rapper 31; Voell 85). The metamorphic snake-man is a representation of what Kadare believes is Albania's inherent European identity which is hidden behind the violent connotations of a snake suit. The man that emerges out of the snake suit "was a handsome young man, with fair hair cut in the fashion of the times" (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 24). Thus, he is a representation of modernity which is bound by the curse of ancient tradition. His fair hair and complexion clearly denote his European ethnicity.

The importance of the *Kanun* as a cultural framework that has maintained its relevance and influence on 21st century Albania is evident in *Spring Flowers*, *Spring Frost*. When the young generation is unable to identify with post-communist modernity moving towards capitalism, they look toward Albania's ancient cultural frameworks such as the *Kanun*. In Benedict Anderson's words, "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation" (26). It is the *Kanun* that had existed in the ancient past and has survived into the present time. It had briefly been on hiatus during the dictatorship as Hoxha had banned it. The revival of the *Kanun* came despite the dormancy of religious practice as "the Kanun was both a practical legal code and 'source of moral authority', which survived in a way that formal religion did not" (Morgan 10). Therefore, it became the unifying framework of self and cultural identity for the disenchanting modern youth. At the same time, this meant the machinery of the *Kanun* was at odds with the machinery of the State whose laws maintained that all murder was illegal.

Since Kadare is a proponent of the *Rilindja* movement, Albania's European identity is a significant issue in his political worldview and the anxiety over how much this identity may have been dented because of Ottoman and, later, Soviet and Chinese influence is often represented in his novels. This particular myth allows Kadare to explore this crisis of identity. There is a great desire among those who had experienced the years of the dictatorship to envision a modern

future away from ancient bloodthirsty traditions. At the same time, he also discusses the growing discontent among the youth over the lack of a sense of purpose which modernity had imposed upon them. These latter seemed to be looking back to the “old ways” to discover some sort of identity (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 74, 92, 164-5). Thus, through the myth, Kadare is clearly depicting the bind in which Albanians found themselves as a truly free and independent nation desperate to march towards modernity without fully having come to terms with its past.

Conclusion

Albania wields little influence and is often orientalist by foreign observers (Rieff 24). However, according to Erica Weitzman, Albania is “what one might call a ‘major’ culture” despite its peripheral and, indeed, marginal position on the socio-political map of modern Europe. This is because the nation is “endowed with strong national myths, heroic figures, folkloric practices, and cultural touchstones that for better or for worse allow Albanians to obscure internal differences and historical complexities in favor of a clear master narrative” (Weitzman 285). This is the kernel of Albanianism that Pashko Vasa had propounded. Myths have always been important in developing national consciousness. Often in Western Europe, “nationalist historians [have constructed] ‘golden ages’ for their communities using sagas like the *Edda* and *Kalevala* and the lays of ‘Ossian’ and the Nibelunglied.” In such cases, the line between myth and history is often blurred as “for the sophisticated ‘myth’ signified a poetic form of history” (Smith 66). The Arthurian legends in the British Isles are a good example. Kadare is trying to create a similar bank of myths and legends, reusing and reconstructing them to suit his contemporary society, on which a new Albanian identity can be constructed.

Each novel examined in this paper has a specific agenda. *The General of the Dead Army* explores Albania in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In it, Kadare mythologises the Albanians and the Albanian terrain where “the country itself never really emerges as anything more than a grimly mysterious, inhospitable, unknowable place” (Weitzman 288). The ancient customs only glanced over in this novel are given their due significance in *The Three-arched Bridge* where Kadare seeks to establish Albania’s mythical origin story and, despite its Eastern influences, the nation’s inherent place in Western European civilisation. The final novel examined, *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, explores Albania’s reckoning with its past as it enters the 21st century as it finds itself caught between an unfamiliar Western modernity and the unifying effects of the ancient *Kanun*.

“Despite the depredations of vendetta and the Kanun, Albanian culture exists in language and song” as Kadare himself writes in his poem “What are these mountains thinking about?”

Thus, for Kadare, Albania's cultural identity lies not in its multiple foreign occupations, invasions or influences but in "the mythological existence which pre-dates all invaders and which exists at the deepest levels of the collective unconscious" (Morgan 60). Thus, However, the stories that Kadare tells are distinctly Albanian. He represents the aforementioned ancient but distinctly Albanian phenomena such as the *Kanun*, the ancient cultural code that had governed the highlands for centuries, the numerous blood feuds that ravaged families and the various myths that upheld the code of honour. Kadare uses these various myths to different extents within his novels but all with the purpose of mythifying the characters and giving them an exotic and oriental tinge. He also intends to show the diversity and strength of Albanian culture by highlighting the nation's oral tradition.

All of these create a culture that is wildly different from any in the West. This self-orientalisation, otherisation from the Western civilisational ideals alongside a desire to be represented as the original germ of the same, is specifically aimed at creating a uniquely Albanian national identity. Kadare is not promoting a reintroduction of the *Kanun* in all its forms. His main aim is to preserve these customs and ways of life for future generations and to show his contemporaries, in Albania and abroad, the richness of Albanian culture and the importance of honour in governance and social coexistence. He intends to reconstruct the Albanian national identity in a way that did not correspond to Ottoman or Soviet modernity but neither does it fully adhere to Western models of civilisation.

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BIO

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