

The totem of buffalo in Albanian literature

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Abstract

The figure of a bull and buffalo have been of great importance to the Albanian speaking people, not only as land working animals and ploughing it, but also as a carrier of supernatural traits inherited from ancient times in a considerable number of rituals and beliefs.

According to the researcher Mark Tirta, “in popular beliefs, cursing a bull was considered a great sin, even when it misbehaved at work. What is more, in certain areas where a bull was bought as a sign of good luck, he had to enter one’s house with his right foot first. In Labëria, especially in the Kardhiqi and Zhulat areas, an old bull was left to roam freely in the forest. Once he was dead, he was buried with full honours. In some areas where a working bull was slaughtered for its meat, it was more of a sacrifice ritual out of those religious holidays, retaining certain tribal traits. In some regions of northern Albania and rarely in the south, it was even given supernatural traits similar to those of a Dragon’s, regarded even as a tribe’s protector. In the village of Kelmend, at the turn of the 20-th century, a story has been told about a bull being lost in a village for a few days after a storm. It was believed he had set off to fight the Dragons as they wanted to wipe out and flood the place. And when they had slaughtered him, they found two or three hearts, or even discovered a cross in his heart.”

Buffalo’s totem gives its title to a complete cycle of poems by Martin Camaj/tsamay/. Its intention for this work is renewing this cycle as a Camaj – reader journey, as a form of reading that nears “buffalo’s” symbolism beyond superficial reading, beginning with its biological meaning, linguistic notion and up to its symbolic affinity to that of North American native Indians. In that piece of work the word “buffalo” (Buall) is also written in a dialect form as (Buell), when cited in poetry or even various interpretations. As a motivation for this work there is Anton Berisha’s interpretation of Camaj and its poetry. He is more than “convinced that the world of legends and anecdotes intertwined with that of myths offered an extraordinary artistic approach.”

Keywords: buffalo, totem, literature, Albanian, writers

1. Introduction

Buffalo and its various meanings

Buffalo’s totem gives its title to a complete cycle of poems written by Camaj. He narrates that there are certain situations in life that one had better forget about, but emphasizes right at the start of the cycle; mud, water, hearth and Arbëria (Albanian Diaspora in Italy). The body of every poem in this cycle carries the signature of the “buffalo”. Picking out “The bull and the buffalo”. At “Buffalo, mountain name”, in a line it brings the buffalo as “lugat/liogat”, here and there “the female buffalo puts its head into a stream to escape the heat”. At “Rhapsody on paper” and “Not knowing where it came from” to dig deep into buffalo’s descent, comes the quote: “De Rada saw how the buffaloes went up through Sibari”; “Who knows where that buffalo came from braying along the river”. Camaj even chooses to narrate in the first person, quoting: ‘I don’t want to see a buffalo being born in this century, slaughtered’. Slowly along the lines we read about the animal’s demise, ‘the buffalo shook its head’. He will not even hesitate identifying the name of the person carrying out the slaughter, ‘He, who goes under the name Me’ksh, slaughtered the young buffalo’. In the last few lines of the cycle ‘there was a wild buffalo’ lightning does not spare even the Buffalo’, but nobody ate that meat in the New Town and anywhere ^[1]. “Creation, is not like developing an exercise or a town, but

The Universe itself, where the connection detail – dynamics brings about creation”. While Barthes assumes that ‘a writer’s duty’ if they would have any, would be to convert the reader not into a simple consumer, but into a script producer” ^[2].

If we were to recreate the “Buffalo” cycle, would we consider it as a journey Camaj – reader?

Camaj gives this question the green light. “We should not confuse the axiomatic part related to a superficial reading which can take the reader to a completely different ending that he has made a biological piece of writing”. How much does the concept of “buffalo” change from biology to mythology? What about religion? How distant is this notion in the Albanian language? Does the buffalo carry several meanings just like the crow?

The encyclopedia defines the buffalo as: (English) Belonging to the CATTLE family, Bovidae. There are two species; the Asian Water Buffalo, *Bubalus arnee* (*bubalis*), and the African Buffalo, *Syncerus caffer*. A buffalo’s forehead is round, its horns tilt and bend a lot before curling up. Its ears are quite big. Short hairs leave an almost exposed and bare skin. This latter one is black, sometimes brownish. They all love a mud bath as it helps them get rid of ticks and other parasites. Africa’s buffaloes are found almost all over the continent; the biggest subspecies is the Cape buffalo, approximately 2.75 metres long. It is host to a blood parasite that causes sleeping sickness in humans through the tsetse fly. Even though

¹ M. Camaj (2010), *Palimpsest*, Onufri. Verses taken out of the cycle “Buell” (Buffalo) p. 59, 67, 68, 72, 73, 75, 78.

² M. Corti, “*Principles of literary communications*”, p. 3

dangerous, it was domesticated later and used as a farming land animal^[3].

The Albanian language dictionary has three uses for the word, BUFFALO.

1- A domesticated regurgitating cloven animal, with a big body, covered in black hair, short neck and pointed horns, used as a farming animal. *Heavy, (clumsy) like a buffalo.* 2- *fig. disapproving a big, heavy but clumsy and thick man.* 3. Stag – beetle^[4].

The word “buffalo” dates back from 1333, Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi in the lexicon “PreBuzuk proof for the Albanian Word”, the word “buffalo” is related to ‘Bua’ (Buff) -- “Bua. m, pl. ‘Buajt’ (Buffaloes) – A feudal Albanian tribe in the South and Greece, even Bua Spata, Shpata (Sword) 1333 M (Greek) Albanian population settled in Thessaly according to Kanatakuzen (BH III160).

The same word, but in feminine is also found in “The Albanian dictionary of Gjon Buzuku”. Buollicë, -a. *f. (or buollicashit) buallicë (female buffalo).* It is only used once: “*at the buffaloes’ square*” (XXVI/2)^[5]. Camaj compensates in the Tosk dialect form of the Himariot medieval toponym; Bua (Buff), in one of the arguments used by Çabejt about the explanation of the etymology of the hypothetical Indo European root, found in the pre – Greek word “boli”, “bula” – dem (bull). The ancient word’s life cycle breathes through a “bulk” of various languages, being shaped in “letter”/arabesque forms, which “imprison” in various forms the same connotation conveyed to the poet through the poetic word of the Albanian language^[6].

“The buffalo” is related to the ancient myth of this creature in several Mediterranean regions as a master of the plains, but also with its extinction process along the river Drin and further. I hope the readers themselves will discover the significance of this poem’s cycle which according to translators and critics comes across as a rather difficult one^[7] “Buffalo’s” Symbolism which ramifies in several directions and spreads in several areas.

This ramifying and dimension is made possible first of all by the mythical element, which runs through the cycle from beginning to end. The mythical element here is not a priori, or even all possessing for that matter^[8].

A language is specified by its high degree of multi – form and ways of expression, symbolism and abstraction; the interrelationship among semantic layers – on what occasion do they go through diachronic and synchronic cutting in the Albanian life and nature – it is interrelated and with numerous connotation possibilities^[9]. Popular composition pattern recaptured in written literature at a further point has touched upon literary lecture bringing it by legendary’s lecture side. You feel as if legends and hyperbole become a distinct sign not only to literature, but the Albanian culture as a whole.

³ The institute of dialogue and communication (2006), The Oxford Encyclopedia, Tirana, p. 192.

⁴ The Science Academy, The Institute of Linguistics and Literature Tirana (1984), Dictionary of nowadays language p. 113

⁵ Th. Qendro (2013), Dictionary of Gjon Buzuku’s Albanian language, The Albanian Biblical Interconfessional Society, Tirana, p. 50.

⁶ B. Suta (2012), The return of Camaj’s word. Palimpsest, Camaj. Shtëpia Onufri, Tirana, p. 12.

⁷ M. Camaj, “*Our individuality comes across through our literature and art*”, November, no. 4, f. 119.

⁸ A. N. Berisha (2010), *Literary work of Martin Camaj. Prince Edition.* p.63

⁹ There again, p. 60.

Social and national issues, political even, have not failed to describe literature from its thematic to its very structure. The Albanian literature has often been influenced by subject even deep literary structure of oral composition. This is even though in Albanian, oral composition throughout the last century was very much alive and productive versus the written form.

2 Buffalo’s symbolism, beyond mythology and European folklore

Different religions describe buffaloes as wild, sleepy, or is there an underlying meaning?

One of them is the Sioux faith, which is a joint name for seven tribal groups, organized into three big political communions. They were first registered under this name in 1640 by Jean Nicolet in Jesuit Relation. Two French explorers in 1660, Radisson and Chouart encountered it in the east, today’s Minnesota in the United States. The Sioux religion develops its symbolism based on a buffalo, the one who carries the core of their lives’ symbolism. He was friends with the sun, checked on every love affair, looked after the family, health, the young and a good crop production. Buffalo’s symbolism was right at the heart of life and way of thinking and the idea of ruining this symbolism was unthinkable to this culture and the traditions it bore. That symbolism presents the Universe in four directions as it too stands on four feet. Each feet represents one of the four stages of a human’s age. On world creation Wakan – Tanka had positioned a buffalo in the west. That placement was all meaningful in order to keep the waters at bay. Every year, it (buffalo) loses some of its hair and out of any of its four ages, he loses a leg. The whole lot will come to an end when the buffalo comes to lose all its hair and legs and then the water returns to cover the Earth. According to them, humans as a species have come out of the Earth’s womb just like buffaloes^[10].

In the “Buffalo” cycle, Camaj not only fails to identify with the origin of the Earth, but verses in the poem “Son of Death” show a complete opposite approach to this belief. It knows nothing of his origin and it is the people who are responsible for his fate. The buffalo does not feel its own Master, but vulnerable instead. The quote goes:

“As they tied it by its head around the oak tree

The buffalo waited and waited to be taken by the back of the axe in its forehead”

It is the complete opposite. The buffalo is asking for protection, its hearth, its stones, perhaps its distant tribe, but its journey ends in the hands of Mekshi.

“The one called Meksh

Slaughtered the young buffalo”

Indian – American folklore links the fate of a buffalo and that of a crow in its tales and legends. Once upon a time, buffaloes were the main source of food to the Indian tribes. Unable to provide sophisticated hunting tools and guns led them to numerous rituals and prayers. A good deal of their hunting tales have come to our days in the form of legends. Two of them, narrated in Indian – American legends, illustrate it all too well:

- “*When the Earth and its people were still young, crows were as white as snow.*

During those early days, people did not even have horses,

¹⁰ <http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/nam/sioux.html>

tools for fire use, or even iron rifles for that matter. Their lives depended greatly on hunting and buffalo meat. A large buffalo was way too difficult and dangerous to be hunted with stony tools. Crows made it even harder for hunters as they were friends with buffaloes. Flying up high, they could see almost everything at a great distance. Wherever they were, they could see the hunters getting organized and off they flew to their friends, landing between their horns and calling 'Caw, caw, caw'! Cousins, the hunters are coming". They are camouflaged and crawling along the tracks. They are coming, behind these hills, watch out! "Caw, caw, caw". As soon as they heard that, the buffaloes ran away in confusion and the people went hungry for yet another day. Therefore, they gathered together around a council and decided how to proceed. Among the warning flock there was a crow twice as old as the rest. It was the leader. A wise old man said: We have to catch the big white crow and give it a good lesson; otherwise we will always go hungry. He took out a big buffalo skin with its head and horns still attached to it and put it on a young man's shoulders. Son, get in among the buffaloes, make them think you're one of them and that is how will get the big white crow. Camouflaged like a buffalo, the young man got in among the herd and even pretended he was grazing. The oldest buffalo did not pay much attention to him. The hunters went after the herd and kept their arches ready. As they got closer, the crows as usual flew in and warned the buffaloes. 'Caw, caw, caw, cousins'! The hunters are coming to kill you, be careful from their arches, Caw, Caw, Caw'! And as always, the entire herd ran off except one, and that was the young camouflaged man still pretending as if he was grazing. Then, the big crow flew over his shoulders, flapped its wings and said 'Caw, Caw, Caw'! Brother, are you deaf by any means? The hunters are close by, on the hill. Save yourself! But the young hunter had caught him. Got him by the legs and tied him up quickly on a heavy stone. No matter how hard he struggled, he found it impossible to get himself free. The council gathered again and had to come to a decision; what to do? One of the hunters thought of burning him and no one dared to stop him. And just like that, without waiting for an answer, he grabbed him by its wings and threw him into the fire. The bird tried to free itself, but tied up to the stone, a good part of its feathers got burned. Now, he was big, but not white. He kept crying and struggling to get away as fast as he could. 'Caw, Caw, Caw'! I will not repeat it again, I will not warn the buffaloes again. Me and the rest of the crow flock. So, he flew away, but ever since they remained black.'^[11]

While 'Brother Crow and brother Buffalo' is a variant of the first narration, its message lies on loyalty. The narration starts almost exactly the same:

"The crow was white at first. He was a brother to the buffalo. Shawn needed the buffalo as he was getting food and skin out of him, but needed the crow as he constantly warned him. Around the fire, during celebrations, before the hunting Cawanemaw said: "We have to do something. I am going to put the buffalo skin on and look for grass. When the crow comes in for warning, I will get him". The next day, they got organized and proceeded. The crow came to warn the buffalo. Cawanemaw jumped up, caught him and took him to the camp. At night, while discussing about the crow's fate around

the fire, Panseau, the youngest and bravest fighter watched and listened to the crow. A lot of thoughts ran through his head, some of them wanted to punish him for being the cause of them going hungry. While others thought of letting it free. Cawanemaw was more hot – tempered than the rest. He grabbed the crow and threw it on fire. Panseau watched him burn and helped him getting out of the fire. Cawanemaw was mad at Panseau. The crow is deceiving us, we are cold and going hungry because he warns the buffaloes. Now you are saving him from the flames? Panseau spoke in a low tone, "the crow warned his brother just like I would have done for you, brother. The crow heard Panseau and said: "I am black now because I warned my brother, and now Panseau is also my brother."^[12]

The aspect of soul discovery continuously preoccupies the author. With life's complexity, in its nature – human – society relations, not quite by chance, he discovers meaningful truths related to portraits of different nature where a discovery about the soul's nobility is made. And that preoccupies him greatly in his later work^[13]. Folklore appears to have gone past geographical borders. The crow and the buffalo seem as if they have been borrowed by Albanian legends, from the crow being burned off in "The Crow" poetry, to the peaceful one in "There is a day for the crow too". This is even though in Albanian, oral composition throughout the last century was alive and productive versus written literature.

Let us get back to the Buffalo's fate. "Brother Crow and brother Buffalo", are inseparable even though from different backgrounds. The Crow of the legend and that of Camaj have peace in common "the crow felt like a pigeon at heart" writes Camaj. The crow is not only brother with the buffalo, but with humans as well, despite them changing his fate.

Let us get back to the "Buffalo" cycle. The last composition in this cycle is called "The New Town" which, stands on the ruins of the old one.

Where did it kill and where it did not?

Amongst it my buffalo was caught

The fire reaching under the shade

Brought a burning skin smell

Incinerating it all into waste.

And no one ate the animal's meat killed by lightning in the New Town

And anywhere

Based on these lines we notice that Camaj has grown in time and found the true origin of sacrifice, the myth, coming from western Asia, where it is said that the world comes into being after death, and everything new symbolizes strength and immortality, as the land is soaked in blood. Everything strong and beautiful comes out of a huge sacrifice.

3. Conclusion

The world came out of the sacrifice of various creatures like; Tortoise, Dranja (name of a tortoise which turned into a bone), Buffalo and Crow, as part of it could not be left out of that sacrifice.

Camaj is part of this sacrifice, of course not physically but spiritually. In return, the buffalo heads towards the fire that burned the hearth, and eventually a whole town is reduced to

¹¹www.NativeAmerican Indian Legends Folklore.com. *How the Crow came to be black.*

¹²There again. NativeAmericanBuffaloMythology. *The BuffaloLegend*

¹³Kalamitri. E (1993) *Poetic subject and lyricism.* Martin Camaj tradition and contemporary. p. 63

ashes. When something is completely burned it triggers two sensations. Compassion, you are never again to see what was there before, and second, pleasure from experiencing regrowth. Fire, in this cycle apart from destruction also bears the sense of something or anything being reborn out of ash. Therefore, out of what has survived in our memory, enough of it in order to identify Camaj with his origin.

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