

## MIGJENI: A TALKING SPIRIT: A TEXTUAL (N)ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS ON ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF THE POET MILLOSH GJERGJ NIKOLLA<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Millosh Gjergj Nikolla – Migjeni, the acclaimed Albanian poet and short story writer (1911–1938), often referred to in popular discourse as *poeti i mjerimit* (Alb. for *the poet of misery*), is celebrated for his innovative impact on Albanian literature, his poetic uniqueness, and his daring exploration of controversial and taboo societal issues in Albania at the time. Raised in an Eastern Orthodox family in the Albanian city of Shkodra (Skadar in Serb.), Migjeni received all his formal education in Serbian (in Shkodra, Bar, and Bitola) and published his poems and short stories in Albanian. This article examines divergent biographical narratives from Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia regarding his ethnic background—something that Migjeni himself, according to the available records, never discussed. The article also provides an overview of current online discourses surrounding Migjeni’s persona, his literary activity, and the post-WWII and contemporary receptions of his legacy in Albania and the region, including speculations about his ethnic identity. The conclusion is that these discussions reveal the persistence of an exclusive identity politics in the Slavo-Albanian domain of interaction and offer an insight into certain internal rifts in Albanian society.

**Key words:** Migjeni, Albanian literature, Albanian-Slavic relations, identity politics, ethnicity

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2 Arshi Pipa, Albanian literary critic, in his 1978 book *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*, written in English, referred to Millosh Gjergj Nikolla – Migjeni as an Albanian speaking Slavic soul/spirit – *shpirti sllav që flet shqip*. I did not have the English original at hand; therefore, I here translate the translation which I saw in the book *Për Migjenin: tri ese*, consisting of three essays about Migjeni by Arshi Pipa (from 1944, 1945, and 1978), prepared by Myftar Gjana, and published by PRINC in 2022 in Tirana. This Slavic ‘label’ by Pipa has been a source of controversy ever since Pipa published the said book in 1978. I use *a talking spirit* in my title here only to refer to the everlasting relevance of Migjeni as a figure in identity politics discourses in Albania and the region.

Milosh Gjergj Nikolla – Migjeni (1911–1938) was a poet and short story writer from Albania. Reading about this author from various biographical accounts, which began to appear shortly after his death and continue to this day, the following commonalities can be deduced: He was a poet born in Shkodra to an Eastern Orthodox couple originating from what is now southern Montenegro and the borderlands between northern Albania and north-western parts of North Macedonia.<sup>3</sup> He was educated in his home town in Albania, in Bar in Montenegro and in Bitola in what is now North Macedonia. His education in his hometown of Shkodra, as well as in Bar and Bitola, was in the Serbian language. After graduating from the Christian Orthodox seminary in Bitola in 1932, he returned to Albania and worked as a teacher, first in the village of Vraka, where a Slavic minority lived, and later in another village called Puka, with a stint in a Shkodra high school in between (Alb. *gjimnaz*). His first literary works were published in 1934 in the magazine *Illyria*, in which he continued to publish until his death – even managing to have one of his works, *Vargjet e lira* (*The Free Verses*),<sup>4</sup> banned by the state censorship of the Zogu regime. All his known literary works are in Albanian. Having suffered from tuberculosis for several years, Migjeni died at the age of 27 in Italy, where he had gone for medical treatment. Although he attracted attention of educated circles in Albania during the years of his literary activity, it was only after his death, and especially after the World War II, that his work gained wider recognition in society, and has remained popular to this day (sources: Pipa 1944; Luarasi 1956; Ceka 2002; Jašović 2018; Zlatičanin 2019). Outside Albania, in the region of the former Yugoslavia, Migjeni first became known through Petro Janura,<sup>5</sup> an Albanian language teacher from Skopje (Sinani 2012: 119–120), and Vojislav Dančetiović, an Albanian language teacher from Belgrade (Đorđević 1996: 141), both of whom were familiar with the literary life of the pre-war and post-war Albania.<sup>6</sup>

3 Many Migjeni's biographies state that Upper Reka in North Macedonia (Mac. Gorna Reka, Alb. Reka e Epërme) is the area from which his paternal grandfather's ancestors hail. Upper Reka is a region of ethnographic interest due to its history as a place of close contact between Albanians, Slavs and Aromanians (Vlachs). There are Slav-Albanian divergent views and even disputes about the 'original' ethnic origins of the populations of the region. More at: Smiljanić 1925; Trifunovski 1983; Mirchevska 2005; Pajaziti, Selimi, Zuferi ed. 2014.

4 All translations from Albanian into English in this text are mine. The original Albanian language versions, for accuracy, are placed in the footnotes in italics.

5 Petro Janura (1911–1983) was born in Fier in Albania in 1913. His family migrated to Romania, where he studied law. In Italy he did his doctorate studies with the thesis *Prezenca e zakoneve popullore në kodin civil shqiptar/ Presence of Customary Laws in the Albanian Civil Code*. After World War II he lived in Yugoslavia (Skopje, now North Macedonia), and worked in the field of Albanian Studies at the University of Skopje (Mustafa 2024).

6 Vojislav Dančetiović (1905–1974) was a Serb from Kosovo who studied French literature in Croatia, Switzerland and France who, after World War II, took over teaching Albanian at the University of Belgrade because of his knowledge of the language (Marković 2022: 59–74). He renewed the work of the Seminar for Albanology (academic year 1948/49), and later was head of the Department of Albanian Language and Literature (Krijezi 2022: 15;

From the beginning of his rise to fame, which gained momentum almost immediately after his death, Migjeni was celebrated for his significant innovative impact on Albanian literature, his poetic uniqueness, and his daring exploration of controversial and taboo societal issues in Albania of the time. Unlike many pre-war Albanian intellectuals, who were banned by the communist regime after the WWII for their alleged reactionary stance (mostly for being perceived as anti-communist and anti-revolutionary), Migjeni's legacy endured and was even embraced by the post-war regime as socialist literature (Elsie 2001; Sinani 2012; Leka 2016; Luka 2017). This acceptance was largely due to Migjeni's work addressing the deep poverty and injustices experienced by most Albanians back then. Because of the themes and tone of his work, Migjeni came to be dubbed *poeti i mjerimit* (Albanian for 'the poet of misery') in public discourse.<sup>7</sup>

Some scholars claim that Migjeni's popularity began to wane with the collapse of the communist regime in Albania and that this "can be linked to the prominent position he held in the communist literary canon" (Ersoy et al, 2010: 306–307). Nevertheless, Migjeni's cultural significance persisted through the regime change, the subsequent democratization, and the post-communist opening of Albanian society. Academic research about him continues, and public discussions about his impact on Albanian literature still seem to occupy the cultural space in Albania and elsewhere. Shkodra named its theatre after Migjeni, although he wrote no dramas or plays. In Albanian-speaking areas, many educational institutions bear his name (including two primary schools in Serbia's Pčinja District, for example). His popularity is such that the acronym Migjeni has become a personal name of many Albanians, as a simple Google search of the term Migjen will reveal.

In addition to Migjeni's continued presence in the cultural life of Albanian-speaking areas, almost a century after his death, through his contribution to Albanian literature, another issue often associated with his name has gained traction, especially with the advent of online media and the digitization of knowledge. This issue revolves around Migjeni's ethnic origin, and thus extends beyond the Albanian cultural sphere to Montenegro and Serbia, with

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20–23). Dančetović's students were Halit Trnavci and Idriz Ajeti, both well-known Albanologists in the former Yugoslavia. Dančetović also worked with Anton Çetta, Albanian folklorist from Kosovo (Đorđević 1996). More about the history of the Department for Albanian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade see at: Mala Imami, Krijezi eds. (2022).

7 We cannot really know what Migjeni's own economic standing was. On the other hand, however, looking at his biography and the information about his own and his sister's education and travels (when only a minority of people, especially women, had access to education and out-of-country travel) as well as at the family photos (for example, the portraits of his grandparents from the beginning of the XX century when having a photograph of oneself made was not available to everyone or the many photos of Migjeni with his family and friends published in the *Dokumente* section of the 2002 edition of *Veptra*), we may not be wrong to conclude that *poeti i mjerimit* – *the poet of misery* himself came from a family that did not suffer from poverty as did the characters of his poems and short stories.

discussions and claims that Migjeni was of Montenegrin or Serbian origin, respectively (Pipa 1944; Shuteriqi 1948; Elsie 2001; Luka 2018; Jašović 2018; Zlatičanin 2019). In contrast, most Albanians claim that he was ethnically Albanian (Luarasi 1956; Thaçi 1969;<sup>8</sup> Ceka 2002; Jorgo 2008; Sinani 2012), some suggesting that his Slavic name Millosh (Serb. Miloš) came from his Christian Eastern Orthodox background. It is also claimed by some that Migjeni's fall from grace after the collapse of the communist regime had to do with Migjeni's Orthodox Serbian background as some nationalist publicists have gone so far as to deny his 'Albanianness' (Ersoy et al, 2010: 306–307).

Migjeni remains a figure of social interest, inside and outside Albania, not only for his *unclear* ethno-national belonging, but also because of his personality – there are still discussions about whether he was a communist sympathizer or not (Jorgo 2008; Sinani 2012; Luka 2017 and 2018), about his religious attitude (Pipa 1944; Sinani 2012; Jorgo 2016), even about his emotional and sexual life (Luka 2017). In the following pages, I will examine several biographies of Migjeni, published in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia at different times (from the immediate post-war period to the present), which provide insight into the receptions of the poet as a phenomenon of ethnic interest in these three countries. In addition to looking at the biographies published in books (on paper), I will engage in *textual (n)ethnography*<sup>9</sup> on Migjeni, i.e., by using online texts as anthropological evidence. I will present an analysis of 'a dialogue' between different texts on the subject, including the narratives about the matter on Albanian, English, and Serbian Wikipedia,<sup>10</sup> which, in this article, is considered as an ethnographic intertextual live-editing field of discursive exchange (Bruckman 2022; Jemielniak 2014).<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of this research is not to determine Migjeni's ethnicity, nor to test the accuracy and factuality of the claims that he was Albanian, Montenegrin or Serb. The aim is to present what has been written about the ethnic background of a poet and short story writer who was one of the two leading figures of literary modernism in Albania (along with the poet Llazar

8 The family name Thaçi (referring here to Hilmi Thaçi, translator from Albanian to Serbian) is written throughout this article in Albanian orthography. However, on the cover of the book with translations into Serbian of Migjeni's poems and short stories from 1969, Thaçi's family name is written Thaçi, an unusual combination of Albanian and Serbian orthography (this version is used in the list of references).

9 *Nethnography* – ethnography on the Internet which, to quote Robert Kozinets, reveals “interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, online rules, practices, and rituals, discursive styles, innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestations of creativity” (Kozinets 2015: 3).

10 I look at Wikipedia here not as a source of information, since it is open to editing by anyone, but as an ethnographic field of intertextual communication in real time. Wikipedia has led me to many reliable sources of information when I started researching Migjeni's life and work in September 2023.

11 On Wikipedia as an ethnographic field, see more at: Raković, Slaviša. 2023. “Wikipedia as object of research, ethnographic field and source of information (?): Nethnography of the most popular online encyclopedia”. *Papers in Ethnology and Anthropology*, 34 (23), 29–50.

Gusho), and who himself never spoke of ethnic feelings or national pride (Ersoy et al, 2010: 306–307).<sup>12</sup> I will start off with the first written accounts of Migjeni’s life and work – from 1944 and 1945 – written by his contemporary and acquaintance Arshi Pipa,<sup>13</sup> the famous Albanian intellectual who spent most of his adult life in exile after fleeing communist Albania in the 1960s. In addition to Pipa’s insights, I will examine what is probably the best-known account on Migjeni’s life and work, written by Skënder Luarasi,<sup>14</sup> the well-known Albanian cultural figure and Migjeni’s brother-in-law (married to his sister Ollga). Luarasi published one of the earliest biographies of Migjeni (1956), which seems to be the basis for much of the information about the poet now available online. When it comes to data on Migjeni written in Serbian, I will present the biography by Hilmi Thaçi, who in 1969 translated most of Migjeni’s known works into Serbian and published them in Belgrade. I will also examine the more recent one by Golub Jašović, a Serbian university professor who in 2018 published a bilingual, Serbian and Albanian, collection of Migjeni’s short stories. From Montenegro, we have Migjeni’s biography by Blagoje Zlatičanin, a Montenegrin from Albania – who now lives in Montenegro and is active around the issues of ethnic Montenegrins in Albania. In 2019, Zlatičanin published a text about Migjeni’s alleged Montenegrin ethnicity in the magazine *Identitet* in Montenegro.

In addition to these biographies, I will present a relatively recent online representation of Migjeni’s legacy and life, starting with Wikipedia, and look at online disputes – focusing specifically on the online exchange over Migjeni’s ethnic background between Agron Luka and Petro S. Luarasi, the respective sons of Gjovalin Luka<sup>15</sup> (who attempted to publish Migjeni’s work in 1954), and

12 “Ai nuk u deklarua etnikisht” – “He never declared ethnically”, was the comment of my Albanian language teacher from Tirana when, in September 2023, I asked her about Migjeni’s family background (I thank American Councils for International Education, the organization where I work, for sponsoring my Albanian language learning and supporting my academic research). It was not the first time I heard of Migjeni, but it was the first time I had the opportunity to learn about him from a literary critic and literature teacher at university, herself from the city of Shkodra, who dedicated a part of her individual lecture to me to talk about Migjeni’s biography and the reception of his legacy from the late thirties of the XX century until our times.

13 Pipa, Arshi (1920–1997). Albanian scholar and writer. More at: Elsie 2010: 356–357.

14 Luarasi, Skënder (1900–1982). Albanian public figure and translator. More at: Elsie 2010: 284–285.

15 There is not much information about Gjovalin Luka on the Internet. From the writings of his son Agron Luka, a historian, we know that Gjovalin Luka was denounced by the communist regime in the mid-1950s and was never fully rehabilitated (Luka 2017: 43–44). A biography of Gjovalin Luka can be found on an unedited Wikipedia page, although it is unverifiable as there are no references. From this biography we learn that Gjovalin Luka was a communist before the Second World War and was arrested by the Zogu regime in 1939. After the war he played an active role in the cultural and political life of the country until 1955, when he fell out of favor with Hoxha, was sent to a psychiatric hospital and then lived in isolation in Zverec, from which he and his family were not released until 1977, according to the biography. In 1979, the regime is said to have admitted certain wrongs

the aforementioned Skënder Luarasi – which testify to how politically charged and exclusive identity politics can be. As a concrete illustration of such politics, I will briefly present a (psycho)analytic reading of the issue of Migjeni's ethnicity through the interpretation of one of his poems, as presented by Kristaq Jorgo, a contemporary Albanian philologist. The concluding remarks will draw from the socio-political context of Migjeni's life and work depicted by Arshi Pipa in an article published in 1978, and from the remarks about Migjeni's background by Ismail Kadare, the world-famous Albanian writer.

## Migjeni: an overview of the most prominent biographical narratives

It is almost certain that all biographies of Migjeni address the question of his ethnic origins. Some state the author's belief about his ethnicity, while others offer detailed analyses, arguing that Migjeni belonged to one ethnicity rather than another. These narratives are reflected in the first online source that appears when searching for Migjeni: Wikipedia.<sup>16</sup>

The English Wikipedia entry on Migjeni provides some insight into his ancestry, noting that his paternal grandfather was from the Upper Reka region (now North Macedonia), his paternal grandmother was from the Kuçi region (and tribe) in Montenegro, and his mother was from Kavajë (Albania), from the Kokoshi family. It states that "some scholars believe that he was of Serbian origin and further speculate that his first language was Serbo-Croatian". However, it also quotes Angjelina Ceka, Migjeni's niece (daughter of Ollga Nikolla and Skënder Luarasi), who claims that Migjeni spoke Albanian as his mother tongue and only learned *Slavic* later. The entry mentions that Migjeni attended an Orthodox school in his hometown, later moved to Bar (Montenegro) to attend school (where his sister Lenka lived), and finally to Bitola (now North Macedonia), where his uncle Jovan Kokoshi was a teacher. It also states that his passport name in 1932 was Millosh Nikoliç,<sup>17</sup> which was changed to Nikolla in

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done to Gj. Luka in the post-war period and asked him to write his own biography so that the state could guarantee him a pension, which Gj. Luka did. In January, Gj. Luka fell ill and an ambulance was called: "The doctors who were called (surprisingly, there were 4 of them) injected him with some kind of medicine which, after 3 hours, unexpectedly brought our father to an alarming condition, which made him leave his legacy and, having done so, he closed his eyes forever/ *Doktorat që u thirrën (çuditërisht 4 prej tyre), i injektuan atij një lloj ilaçi, ilaç i cili pas 3 orëve e solli babain tonë, fare papritur, në gjëndjen më alarmante për lënjen e amaneteve të tija dhe, pasi la ato, ai i mbylli sytë përjetësisht*". Source: <[https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%ABrdoruesi:Adrian\\_Gjovalin\\_LUKA/Gjovalin\\_Luka](https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%ABrdoruesi:Adrian_Gjovalin_LUKA/Gjovalin_Luka)> Accessed: 24 July 2024

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>17</sup> Albanian orthography would require that family name Nikolić in Serbian be written as Nikoliq in Albanian. The version Nikoliq was used in Migjeni's passport from 1932 (Zlatičanin 2019).

1933 in a document issued by the Ministry of Education, and this new surname appeared on his revised birth certificate in 1937.<sup>18</sup>

The Albanian Wikipedia entry, under the subtitle “Prejardhja/Origins”, dedicated to his ethnic background, says that according to a close relative, the family was of Albanian origin, but according to Arshi Pipa, their origins were Slavic. This section states that Migjeni, together with his sister Ollga, attended a Serbian primary school in their hometown. It also mentions that he was educated in Bar (Albanian: Tivar) and that his uncle, referred to as Jovan Kokosheviqi, secured a scholarship for him to study at the Orthodox seminary in Bitola.<sup>19</sup>

The Serbian Wikipedia entry says that Miloš Đerđ Nikola was an Albanian writer of Serbian origin, born in Vraka, who wrote in Serbian, Russian and Albanian, and is now considered a reformer of Albanian literature. This entry reads that “Miđeni’s talent, rebellious in nature, broke Albanian poetic and prosaic traditionalism by introducing a new style and forms in poetry and narrative”.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting that the Serbian Wikipedia section for external links leads towards the article by Blagoje Zlatičanin who claimed that Migjeni was Montenegrin by origin.<sup>21</sup>

As for pre-internet biographies, Arshi Pipa, mentioned in the Albanian and English Wikipedia entries, provided literary reviews of Migjeni’s work as early as 1944 and 1945<sup>22</sup> from which we know that Migjeni’s work was published during his lifetime in journals *Iliria* and *Bota e Re*, despite Migjeni’s poetic criticism of the regime of the time. His biographers from our times, as we shall see, note that the Zogu authorities disapproved of his portrayal of Albanian society, and claim that state censors banned publishing of his collection *Vargjet e lira* in 1936.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, just three years after his death, Migjeni was included in the textbook *Albanian Writers, Part II, From the League of Prizren to the*

18 Migjeni: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migjeni>> Accessed 25 July 2024

19 Migjeni: <<https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migjeni>> Accessed 25 July 2024

20 Милош Ђерђ Никола: <[https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr-el/Милош\\_Ђерђ\\_Никола](https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr-el/Милош_Ђерђ_Никола)> Accessed 25 July 2024

21 Ibid.

22 In this article I used Pipa’s views and testimonies about Migjeni from a book prepared for publishing by Myftar Gjana (published in 2022 in Tirana) – “Arshi Pipa *Për Migjenin: tri ese*” – which contain three essays by Pipa: “Historija e dhimshme e ‘shpirtit e ri’/ A painful history of a ‘new spirit’” (5–39), published in 1944 in (Gheg) Albanian; “Përkujtim i Migjenit/Memories of Migjeni” (40–60), published in 1945 in (Gheg) Albanian; and “Miti i Perëndimit në Poezinë e Migjenit/The Western Myth in Migjeni’s Poetry”, published in English in 1978, translated into Standard Albanian by Myftar Gjana.

23 Arshi Pipa, in his article “Historija e dhimshme e ‘shpirtit të ri’/ A painful history of a ‘new spirit’”, claimed that “Migjeni cancelled publishing of the book, therefore the incomplete book, printed in one thousand pieces, remained back then and to this day in the warehouses of the printing house ‘Gutenberg’/Migjeni e pezulloi botimin, dhe libri i paplotsuem, shtypun një njimij copë, mbeti atëherë e deri sot ndër depot e shtypshkronjës ‘Gutenberg’” (Pipa 2022, 5)

*Present*,<sup>24</sup> edited by Ernest Koliqi<sup>25</sup> and Karl Gurakuqi<sup>26</sup>, prominent Albanian literary figures. Koliqi and Gurakuqi were later condemned by the post-war Albanian communist regime as supporters of the old regime and fascist collaborators. Their recognition of Migjeni shows that shortly after his death he was regarded as a significant figure for Albanian literature even by those who were perceived as his ideological opponents. In his articles on Migjeni from the 1940s, Pipa claimed that Migjeni himself had stopped the publication of his *Vargjet e lira* in 1936 (although a few copies were circulating informally among those who respected his poetry). In both articles, Pipa claimed that Migjeni's knowledge of Russian and Yugoslav literature influenced his writing. As for Migjeni's Albanian, in the 1945 article Pipa wrote:

"I got to know Migjeni. I got to know him in Pukë during the summer of 1936. At the time he was a teacher at the village's primary school... It has been many years since; my memories are foggy. However, I clearly remember his sharp and fine face, and his clear, gentle eyes. I also remember the way he read, with a somewhat different accent from what was usual. This could be explained by the fact that Migjeni was raised and educated outside the homeland. He went to Yugoslavia as a child, where he nearly forgot the Albanian language during his emigration time" (Pipa 2022: 40–41)<sup>27</sup>

More than three decades later, in his book *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*, published in 1978 in exile, Pipa wrote about Migjeni's ethnic origins:

"Born Albanian to a family of Slavic origin, then educated in a Slavic cultural milieu, he made contact again with Albania and the Albanian language and culture as an adult. The language he spoke at home was Serbo-Croatian, and at the seminary he learned Russian. He did not know Albanian well. His texts swarm with spelling mistakes, even elementary ones, and his syntax is far from being typically Albanian" (Pipa 1978, quoted in Elsie 2001)<sup>28</sup>

Pipa argues that by examining Migjeni's poetic form, we can gain insight into his diverse cultural background. According to Pipa, Migjeni stands out from other Albanian writers due to his unique poetic approach and his strong preference for hyperbolic and eccentric metaphors, which deviate from the

24 "Shkrimtarët Shqiptarë, Pjesa II, Prej Lidhjes së Prizrenit deri sot"

25 Koliqi, Ernest (1903–1975). Albanian prose writer, scholar, and public figure. More at: Elsie 2010: 234–236.

26 Gurakuqi, Karl (1895–1971). Albanian scholar and translator. More at: Elsie 2010: 177–178.

27 "Un e kam njoftë Migjenin. E kam njoftë në Pukë, gjatë verës së vjetit 1936. Aso kohe ai ishte mësues në shkollën filllore të katundit...Kanë kalue shumë vjetë ç'atëherë e shumë gjana më kujtohen si nepër mjegull. Por mbaj mend fëtyrën e tij të hajthët, t'imtë, syt e tij të qartë e të butë. Mbaj mend edhe si lexonte, me një theks pakë të ndryshëm prej theksit të zakonshëm. Dhe kjo spjegohej: mbasi Migjeni ishte rritë e shkollue përjashta atdheut. Ai kishte shkue qysh i vogël në Jugosllavi...Gjuhën shqipe thuejse e kishte harrue gjatë kohës së mërgimit."

28 This quote was taken from an online article available at: <<http://books.elsie.de/2004–1986/b24.html>> (Accessed July 25, 2024)



Albanian literary norm. Pipa goes further by claiming that the distinctive feature of Migjeni's work is its messianic tone, which contrasts with typical Albanian attitudes but resonates more with Slavic psychological traits. Consequently, Pipa continues, although Migjeni wrote in Albanian and contributed to the Albanian literature, his style and mindset show strong Slavic influences (Pipa 2022: 67–70). In addition to these qualifications of Migjeni's ethnic origin and literary style, Pipa wrote in 1978, in disparity to what he wrote in 1944, that Migjeni's collection of poems had indeed been confiscated by the Zogu regime in 1936, and that his *Vargjet e lira* saw the light only in 1944 (Pipa 2022: 64).<sup>29</sup>

One of the first attempts to collect Migjeni's work in one volume with a critical overview was made in 1948, on the tenth anniversary of Migjeni's death, by Dhimitër Shuteriqi,<sup>30</sup> the well-known literary historian and one of the founders of the Albanian League of Writers and Artists, who had written about Migjeni as early as in 1938 (Zeqo 2016). In another attempt, a book with the title *Vepra* (Alb. for the complete works of a writer or artist) was supposed to be published in 1954, edited by Gjovalin Luka, a pre-war anti-fascist who fell out of favor with the communist regime for reasons unrelated to the book. This had the side effect of halting the circulation of the book (Luka, 2018). In 1956–57, an edition with the same title (*Vepra*) appeared, this time edited by Skënder Luarasi, an intellectual figure from a prominent Albanian family. Luarasi wrote an unfavorable review of Gjovalin Luka's 1954 edition, criticizing Luka for his editorial shortcomings and interventions (Luka, 2018).

Migjeni collaborated with Luarasi during his lifetime. Luarasi later had married Migjeni's sister Ollga, making him Migjeni's brother-in-law. The Luarasi edition included a biography of Migjeni, which still seems to be the main source of information about the poet and is still cited by Migjeni scholars and enthusiasts (with or without attribution to Luarasi). The Luarasi edition from the 1950s was republished in 2002 by Angelina Ceka, daughter of Skënder Luarasi and Ollga Nikolla, but this time with family photos of Migjeni and his closest relatives and friends, as well as transcriptions of his correspondence with them (Ceka 2002).

Skënder Luarasi wrote Millosh's life story in 1956, painting a picture of the poet through the testimonies of his sister Ollga and his friend from the Bitola seminary, Theofan Popa. From Luarasi we learn that Migjeni was born in Shkodra, *në mëhallën e Fretënve* (a part of Shkodra),<sup>31</sup> and was appointed to teach in Vraka after the Albanian state had taken over all the schools in the country and the language of instruction in minority schools had been changed from minority languages to Albanian. Migjeni's appointment coincided with

29 The 1944 edition, this time through the efforts of Ollga Nikolla, expanded to include poems written shortly before his death (Ceka 2002: 258).

30 Shuteriqi, Dhimitër (1915–2003). Albanian scholar, literary historian, and writer. More at: Elsie 2010: 417.

31 Golub Jašović, the editor of the bilingual *Lepota koja ubija-Bukuria që vret*, claimed in the foreword that Migjeni was born in Vraka (Jašović 2018: 7).

what Luarasi claimed had been an effort by the Yugoslav consulate to bring Migjeni to Belgrade to study theology or to send him to Vojvodina to become a priest (Migjeni himself wanted to study literature and was expecting a scholarship to realize his plan). To the Yugoslav consulate, allegedly, “Millosh replied in the language of a patriot, saying that as an Albanian he wanted to serve his country and his people”<sup>32</sup> (Luarasi 1956: xv). The Yugoslav consulate blacklisted Migjeni and withdrew the Yugoslav state scholarship from his sister Ollga, who was studying at the Gymnasium in Sarajevo at the time. A few years later, the Yugoslav consulate refused to grant Migjeni a visa to go to Slovenia to treat his lung problems in a sanatorium (Luarasi 1956: vii-xxv). This biography does not mention that the surname of the family up until 1933 was Nikolić/Nikoliq.

As mentioned above, Luarasi’s edition continues to serve as a source of information for Migjeni’s biographies to this day and seems to have been the basis for biographies written by Hilmi Thaçi (1969), Golub Jašović (2018), and Blagoje Zlatičanin (2019).<sup>33</sup> We have seen that Luarasi had first-hand information about Migjeni’s life and work through the family network. Through these connections he was able to establish himself as a specialist in the field of *Migjeni studies* – providing an authoritative view on Migjeni’s legacy, including the views on the poet’s ethnic background and ideological inclinations. On the other hand, there are views that Luarasi used Migjeni’s legacy to reassert his own position in the apparatus of official cultural politics, from which he was expelled, for several years, by the Hoxha regime in 1950 (Luka 2017, 2018). For example, we have already mentioned Luarasi’s reaction to the edition of Gjovalin Luka from 1954, who was also denounced by the communist regime but, unlike Luarasi, never managed to get rehabilitated. Luarasi also used Migjeni’s literary career as a backdrop to denounce the emigre Albanian intellectual Ernest Koliqi, who helped publish the poet’s works in *Illyria* in the mid-1930s, because, according to Luarasi, Koliqi wanted to “secure at all costs Migjeni’s cooperation” (Luarasi 1956: xvii).<sup>34</sup> Luarasi’s alleged ‘appropriation/privatization’ (Luka 2018) of Migjeni and the controversies surrounding it outlived him and were passed on to the generation that followed his own – which I will present after addressing briefly the biographical receptions of Migjeni in (post) Yugoslavia.

32 “Milloshi iu përgjegj me gjuhën e një patrioti, duke thënë se, si shqiptar që ishte, dëshironte të vihej në shërbim të atdheut e të popullit të tij”.

33 Some details from Migjeni’s biography presented by Thaçi, Jašović and Zlatičanin were for the first time published in the Luarasi 1956 edition of *Vepra*, therefore I assume that the said details were taken from there.

34 “ta siguronte me çdo kusht bashkëpunimin e Migjenit”. In 1974 Koliqi wrote a text *Migjeni and I/ Migjeni dhe unë (Shëzjat XVIII)*, published in Rome, Italy) in which he reflected on Luarasi’s allegations, claiming that at the time when Migjeni’s poetry came out in *Illyria*, the magazine could not have been considered as aligned with the Zogu regime. On the contrary, Koliqi claims, with each new edition to come out the magazine had difficulties with the Ministry of Interior of the time. <<https://www.kultplus.com/libri/migjeni-dhe-une/>> Accessed: 24 July 2024

## Migjeni in (post) Yugoslavia

Migjeni's work was known in Belgrade in the early years of communist Yugoslavia thanks to Vojislav Dančetović, who taught Albanian at the University of Belgrade. Upon his visit to Albania shortly after the end of WWII, Dančetović brought back many works by Albanian writers, including writings by and about Migjeni (Đorđević 1996: 141). Perhaps one of the first written mentions of Migjeni in Serbian was in 1950 by Hasan Kaleshi, Yugoslav oriental studies scholar (of Albanian origin). Kaleshi wrote an article titled "New Inspirations of Albanian Writers", *Literary Gazette* No. 40, p. 2, in which he argued that "Albanian literary critics from before the war were reluctant to mention Millosh Nikolla-Migjeni, one of the few Albanian poets from between the two wars who had the courage to address the pressing social problems of Zogu's Albania" (Kaleshi 1950).<sup>35</sup> In Skopje, home to the second-oldest Albanian language department in Yugoslavia, Petro Janura published several articles on Migjeni in the 1950s. In 1982, a year before his death, Janura published a 325-page critical edition of Migjeni's works (Sinani: 2012; Neziri 2012).

In 1968, Migjeni's *Vargjet e lira* were translated for the first time into Serbian (then Serbo-Croatian) in Priština. The translator was Esad Mekuli, a well-known Kosovo Albanian poet (born in Plav, Montenegro) and editor of the journal *Jeta e re* (Thaçi 1969: 160). In 1969, the Belgrade based Rad Publishing House (*Biblioteka Reč i misao*) published a collection of Migjeni's poems and short stories, selected and translated by the Yugoslav Albanian scholar Hilmi Taçi. In this edition, titled *Prekinuta melodija/Interrupted Melody*,<sup>36</sup> Taçi wrote an afterword which included Migjeni's biography.<sup>37</sup> In a footnote he mentioned Migjeni's ancestry – writing that the poet's paternal grandmother "was an Albanian from the Kuči tribe in Montenegro", his paternal grandfather was from Debar, and his father was born in Berat. Taçi wrote nothing about Migjeni's mother and her ancestry (Thaçi 1969: 157–160).

35 In this article, Kaleshi wrote about the literary politics (or rather the politicization of literature) of the immediate post-war period in Albania in which he informed the Yugoslav public that the League of Writers and Artists of Albania had withdrawn the membership of several well-known literary figures of the time: Sejfulla Malëshova, Skënder Luarasi, Mitrush Kuteli and Andon Frashëri. Kaleshi wrote that Sejfulla Malëshova was excluded, even though the post-war Albanian literary critique, politicized in Kaleshi's view, thought that Malëshova had "opened the stage for new literature in Albania", that "a pedestal should be erected for him... his picture should be placed next to that of the greatest Albanian poet, Naim Frashëri", and in the preface to the book of Malëshova's poetry, it is said that Migjeni compared to Malëshova looked "like the pale light of a candle to the dazzling light of an electric lamp" (Kaleshi 1950).

36 The title to the collection was given after one of Migjeni's famous poems *Melodi e Këputun/Prekinuta melodija* consists of 24 short stories and 40 poems which made it be a collection of almost the entire work of Migjeni – in the words of Taçi.

37 Danilo Kiš, acclaimed Serbian author and journalist and Mirko Kadić, interpreter and, according to Taçi, Migjeni's close friend he went to school with, worked on this edition of Migjeni's works (Thaçi 1969: 160)

Almost fifty years later, the *Literary Society of Kosovo and Metohija/ Književno društvo Kosova i Metohije* published a bilingual Serbian-Albanian collection of Migjeni's prose (25 stories) *Lepota koja ubija – Bukuria që vret*<sup>38</sup> – selected and translated by Golub Jašović, who also wrote the foreword to the edition (Jašović 2018: 7–14). As for Migjeni's name on the title page, it is written in both Serbian and Albanian orthography – Miloš Nikolić/Millosh Gjergj Nikolla Migjeni. From the preface we read that Miloš Nikolić was born in the village of Vraka, near Shkodra (Skadar in Serbian), to the family of Đorđe Nikolić and Sofija Kokošević, and that the family spoke Serbian at home. In support of the assertion that Serbian was the language of Migjeni's family, Jašović cites Vehbi Bala's 1977 book *Migjeni – Portret-monografi*, which confirms this claim, and states that Migjeni wrote his first verses in Serbian (pages 11 and 26 in Bala's book).<sup>39</sup> Jašović also writes that Migjeni's first verses in Albanian, *Vargjet e lira*, were published in the literary magazines *Illyria* and *Bota e re*, and that the editors were not really looking forward to publishing his writings because of their satirical tone and content, which was critical of society of the time. Jašović suggests that Migjeni's ethnic origins must have played a role in the marginalization of his work during his lifetime, and that his efforts to hide his origins under the pen name Migjeni did not do much to help him gain recognition. Jašović also writes in his foreword that, to his knowledge, Migjeni's prose had not been translated into Serbian before the publication of *Lepota koja ubija/Bukuria që vret*, while at the same time in the footnote he states that Hilmi Thaçi had already translated Migjeni's stories and poems back in 1969 (Jašović 2018: 11). Indeed, several stories translated by Thaçi in 1969 were also translated by Jašović and published in the 2018 book – including the title story *Bukuria që vret*.<sup>40</sup> From Jašović's foreword, we learn that Migjeni's sister Olga (Alb. Ollga) was by his side when he died, and that she herself was involved in literature, writing about her brother and her family (Jašović 2018: 7–8).

The most recent biography in the post-Yugoslav regions is probably that of Blagoje Zlatičanin, Montenegrin born, raised and educated in Albania, who in 2019 wrote an article published in the magazine *Identitet* – “Albanski pjesnik Migjeni je Crnogorac Miloš Nikolić”. The article is largely dedicated to proving that Migjeni was of Montenegrin background, that his surname was Nikolić, based on Orthodox Church documents and the passport issued in 1932. Zlatičanin writes that in the early thirties of the last century, Migjeni aspired to study literature in Belgrade and, while waiting for a reply from the

38 “The killing beauty”

39 I did not have an opportunity to obtain Bala's book from 1977, therefore could not confirm Jašović's claims. In another article on Migjeni, Jašović claims that Skënder Luarasi, Migjeni's brother-in-law, in the book *Vepra e Migjenit* from 1958, confirmed that Migjeni, while at Bitola seminary, wrote not only in Serbian but also in the Russian language (Jašović 2019: 170–171).

40 For example: Napaçeni Sokrat – ili zadovoljni krmak (Thaçi)/Napaçeni Sokrat ili zadovoljna svinja (Jašović); Ili ili; Gospodine, želite li uglja? (Thaçi)/ Želite li çumura gospodine (Jašović); Mali Ljulji etc.

Yugoslav authorities, applied to become a teacher in Albania, and it was only when he was appointed as a teacher in Vraça, near Shkodra, his surname was changed to Nikolla.<sup>41</sup> According to Zlatičanin, the Albanization of Migjeni's surname took place at the time when the Albanian King Zogu, with the help of Mussolini, began to implement the project of creating a Greater Albania. One of the consequences of this project, Zlatičanin writes, was the closure of the school in Vraça and the expulsion of Vidosava and Lazar Brajović, the married couple who served as teachers and taught in "our language". Migjeni came to Vraça to teach after his application for a scholarship to study literature in Belgrade was rejected by the Yugoslav authorities. He was offered by these same authorities to become a priest in Vojvodina or to study theology in Belgrade. Migjeni rejected this offer because of his rebellious nature and chose to become a teacher in Albania. Zlatičanin also claims that Migjeni's refusal to accept the Yugoslav authorities' offer had put him on their blacklist, and that his sister Ollga's scholarship to study in a Sarajevo high school was withdrawn as a result. According to Zlatičanin, Migjeni stayed in Vraça for a year, teaching in "our language", and then taught for some time at a high school in Shkodra. At his own request, because of his poor health, he got transferred from Shkodra to the village of Pukë, where the climate was more favorable to his health. From this article by Zlatičanin we also read that Migjeni's remains were transferred with state honors to the Orthodox cemetery in Shkodra in 1956, but that they had to be transferred again in 1967 when the cemetery was destroyed for the purpose of building a hospital. According to Zlatičanin, Migjeni's remains were moved to the municipal cemetery by his nephew Đorđe Perić (who also moved the remains of Migjeni's father, Đoko), and it was only afterwards that the state authorities decided to move Migjeni's remains to a special section of the cemetery dedicated to prominent Albanians (Zlatičanin 2019: 40–44).

Zlatičanin, similarly to Jašović, speculates that Migjeni also had writings in "our language", but that he could not publish them because the period of his literary activity coincided with the Zogu regime's accelerated assimilationist policy. Migjeni allegedly gave these writings to Jordan Mišović,<sup>42</sup> a friend of his from Shkodra with whom he also studied at the seminary in Bitola. Zlatičanin adds that there were several theories about what happened to his non-Albanian writings. According to one theory, they were given to Ollga Nikolla by a priest who rescued them from Mišović's house during the war.<sup>43</sup> Zlatičanin claims that Migjeni's correspondence

41 The article by Zlatičanin is accompanied by the photos of Migjeni's baptism certificate (Serb. *kršteno pismo*) and his passport from 1932 which state his family name as Nikolić/Nikoliq.

42 WWII partisan hero, called Jordan Misja in Albanian.

43 The 2002 edition, prepared by Angelina Ceka, of Migjeni's *Veptra*, the chronology provided at the end of the book tells of an event from 1942 „during the siege of Jordan Misja by the fascist militia in Shokdër, the manuscripts, which Migjeni had entrusted to Misja for safeguarding, were also burned” / *gjatë rethimit të Jordan Misjes nga milicia fashiste në Shokdër u dogjën edhe dorëshkrimet e Migjenit, të cilat ja pati besuar për t'i ruajtur*” (Ceka 258). However, Agron Luka, son of the previously mentioned Gjovalin Luka, claims that Admirina

with his friends from his hometown, “who were all Montenegrins”, was exclusively in “our language”. Zlatičanin concludes his article by saying that great poets do not have a nation, adding that in 1985 he was invited to translate some documents from Serbo-Croatian into Albanian when an exhibition was organized in Migjeni’s honour in Tirana, and that he saw two books by Migjeni, one in “our language” and the other in Macedonian. “If you ask about them now, you will be told that they do not exist” (Zlatičanin 2019: 44–46).<sup>44</sup>

## On Migjeni’s origins in contemporary Albania

As mentioned above, Luarasi’s 1956 edition of Migjeni’s *Vepra* was republished by his daughter Angelina Ceka on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet’s birth and included previously unpublished letters from the poet to his family and friends, as well as the photographs of Migjeni and his family and friends (of all the letters, the only facsimile included in the book was the one of a letter from 1936 Migjeni sent to Skënder Luarasi). This 2002 edition had a significant impact in Albanian cultural circles. The family legacy was, once again, examined through the narration of Migjeni’s life by Ceka, who, as the portal *Kultplus* wrote, “is very concerned about all the malicious things that have been said against Migjeni in the last ten years. She has carefully studied all the articles written in the press of our time”.<sup>45</sup> In the afterword, Ceka lamented

Peçi „rediscovered the authentic manuscripts from the former Archives of the Central Committee...in the Migjeni File, no. 1 (170), preserved in trust by the martyr Jordan Misja, and which were handed over by Haki Llazani on August 16, 1956/ *i rizbuloi nga ish Arkiva e KQ... në Dosjen Migjeni, nr. 1 (170), dorëshkrime autentike të Migjenit të ruajtura me amanet nga dëshmori Jordan Misja nga Haki Llazani, që i kishte dorëzuar më 16 gusht 1956*” (Luka 2018).

44 Zlatičanin is not the only one to hint that not all the work of Migjeni is known to the public. Shaban Sinani recalls the claims of Kaplan Burović and writes: „It cannot be considered that Migjeni’s work is completely published... A part of the correspondence is missing... Some researchers – among them Gertruda Iosifovna Eintrei... have also mentioned a diary from his years in the seminary. The disappearance had to do with a visit of Migjeni to the Soviet Union, about which has not ever been talked about. On the other hand, writer K. Burović, in some notes of his from 1972, recalls memories of some manuscripts of Migjeni’s early poems, which he saw in 1962 in the hands of dr. Petro Janura, head of the Albanology Department in Skopje. These manuscripts probably were from the years at the seminary of St. John the Theologian in Bitola and were written in Serbian/ *Vepra e Migjenit nuk mund të konsiderohet e botuar plotësisht...Mungon një pjesë e letërkëmbimit... Nga disa studiues – midis tyre dhe Герируга Иосифовна ЭЙНТРЕЙ...është përmendur dhe një ditar i viteve të seminarit. Zhdukja e tij është lidhur edhe me një vizitë të Migjenit në Bashkimin Sovjetik, vizitë për të cilën nuk është folur kurrë. Ndërsa shkrimtari K. Burović, në disa shenjime të vitit 1972, kujton disa dorëshkrime të poezive të hershme të Migjenit, që i kishte parë në vitin 1962 në duart e dr. Petro Januras, shef i departamentit të albanologjisë në Shkup. Këto dorëshkrime duhej t’i takonin viteve të seminarit Shën Gjon Theologu të Manastirit dhe ishin shkruar në serbisht” (Sinani 2012: 119).*

45 “...është mjaft e prekur nga gjithçka dashakeqe që është thënë kundër Migjenit këto dhjetë vitet e fundit. Ajo i ka ndjekur me shumë kujdes të gjithë artikujt e shkruar në shtypin e kë-

the neglect of Migjeni's legacy by the Albanian state and society, but also the "lowest slanders" (Alb. *shpifje më të uleta*) that "it is written that he was not Albanian and that the family was of Slavic origin, ignoring the facts presented in Skënder Luarasi's biography, which testifies the Albanian blood of the poet from the Nikolla family of Dibër and from the Kokoshi family of Shkodra"<sup>46</sup> (Ceka 2002: 265).<sup>47</sup>

The publication by Ceka in 2002 was, over the years, followed by a series of online articles discussing the question of Migjeni's ethnic origin. For example, Moikom Zeqo, an Albanian scholar who has studied Migjeni's work, praised the new edition, saying that "some additional notes in the book dispel the myth that Migjeni's family was supposedly of Serbian origin... Mrs. Angelina Ceka has done a commendable and very useful job"<sup>48</sup> (Zeqo 2010). It is true, however, that the 2002 edition of *Vepra*, just as the one from 1956, did not mention anywhere that the surname of the family up until 1933 was Nikolić/Nikoliq. Agron Luka, Gjovalin Luka's son, kept reacting over the years following the 2002 edition of *Vepra*, to what he saw as the perpetuation of injustices against his father. He also pointed to inaccuracies and fabrications originating, as he claimed, from the Luarasi family— about Migjeni, his ethnic origins – which all started by Skënder Luarasi's 'privatization' of Migjeni's legacy and continued by his son Petro Luarasi and daughter Angelina Ceka.<sup>49</sup> Agron Luka did not question Migjeni's belonging to the Albanian nation – since Migjeni's known public literary work was only in Albanian, and the themes and setting of his

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*tyre kohëve*". Source: <<https://www.kultplus.com/libri/migjeni-dhe-dashuria-e-perfolur-mekusheriren-e-tij/>> Accessed 25 July 2024

- 46 "...është shkruar që nuk ishte shqiptar dhe se familja e tij kishte origjinë sllave, duke injoruar faktët e paraqitura në biografinë e Skënder Luarasit, që dëshmojnë gjakun shqiptar të poetit nga familja dibrane e Nikollave dhe ajo shkodrane e Kokoshëve".
- 47 It was mentioned here that, upon the fall of communism, the Albanian literary critique started to view Migjeni in a manner free of state control, and that the post-communist nationalism had some impact on the societal perception of Migjeni's legacy. Even in our times there are views that Migjeni does not get due respect (Ceka 2002; Luka 2017). Here is an interesting take by Artan Lame, Albanian public figure and publicist, about the status of Migjeni in his hometown: "The people of Shkodra do not love Migjeni. I am not talking about ordinary people... Migjeni is not loved by those who have education and who think of themselves as academics and the elite of the city... They didn't even love him when he was alive... even Shkodra people of today do not love him. Otherwise, there is no way of explaining that they are almost fearful of mouth his name; that more than once they attempted to remove his name from the theater; that his bust was broke, and that his grave got forgotten in the dirt of the city/ *Shkodranët nuk e duan Migjenin. Nuk them për njerëzinë e thjeshtë... Migjenin nuk e duan ata që kanë shkollë e që i mbajnë për të dijshtëm e për elitë të qytetit... As e kanë dashur në të gjallë... edhe shkodranët e sotëm nuk e duan Migjenin. Ndryshe nuk ka si shpjegohet që gati druhen t'i zënë emrin me gojë; që më tepër se një herë kanë dashur t'i heqin emrin nga Teatri; që i kanë thyer bustin, e i kanë harruar varrin midis plehrave të qytetit...*" (Lame 2019).
- 48 "...disa shënime përcjellëse të këtij libri hedhin poshtë mitin se goja familja e Migjenit ka pasur origjinë serbe...Zonja Angelina Ceka ka bërë një punë të lavdëruar dhe shumë të dobishme".
- 49 In this article I focus on Luka's texts from 2017 (in a hardcopy publication) and 2018 (online).

literature were Albanian. However, Luka argues that the attribution of Albanian origin to Migjeni's family, initiated by Skënder Luarasi, was a fabrication without evidence – for example, Migjeni's paternal grandmother's surname was changed from Milanić to Milani; Luarasi also failed to mention the fact that Migjeni's own surname was Nikolić, and was only changed to Nikolla when the governmental pressure (early 1930s) to de-slavicise certain surnames began (Luka 2018).

For these claims, Agron Luka was accused of fabrications by Petro Luarasi, the son of Skënder Luarasi, who had collected his father's manuscripts and letters several years before this online exchange with Agron Luka, with an aim of shedding light on some aspects of social, political, and cultural life in Albania in the post-WWII period and the role of his father in it, in particular on the 1948 exchange between Skënder Luarasi and Dhimitër Shuteriqi regarding the legacy of Migjeni. In online media, Petro Luarasi gave an interview about these manuscripts, which was titled *Migjeni in the Procrustes' Bed*,<sup>50</sup> naming the poet's alleged historical *Procrustes* and a contemporary one:

"I can mention Karl Gurakuqi, Dhimitër Shuteriqi, what Arshi Pipa said on two occasions in 1944 and 1945. Robert Elsie, a trustworthy researcher, but in the case of Migjeni, he stepped on a rotten board by saying that Migjeni was of Serb origin and that he did not know the Albanian language" (P. Luarasi).<sup>51</sup>

Speculations about Migjeni's ethnicity, as we have seen, provoke discussions and generate assertions, some of which are more careful, and some less so, about the facts and sources of information. Among the scholarly accounts that specifically address Migjeni's ethnic background, one stands out for its attempt to prove Migjeni's 'Albanian blood' through an interpretation of one of his poems. In 2008, Kristaq Jorgo, an Albanian philologist and university professor, wrote an article *Mbi identitetin etnik të Millosh Gjergj Nikollës / Migjenit (1911–1938) përmes një leximi të ri të poezisë Kangë në vete / On the ethnic identity of Milosh Gjergj Nikolla / Migjeni (1911–1938) through a new reading of the poem Kangë në vete*, in which he goes to great lengths to prove that Migjeni was Albanian (Jorgo 2008: 145–176).

In this article, Jorgo offered his own thoughts on the hidden messages of the poem *Kangë në vete*, and provided an overview of where other Albanian scholars and writers placed Migjeni ethnically. In short, Jorgo stated that Skënder Luarasi, Petro Janura, Rinush Idrizi, Moikom Zeqo and some others insisted that Migjeni was undoubtedly Albanian, while Dhimitër Shuteriqi, Gjovalin Luka, Arshi Pipa claimed that he was undoubtedly of Slavic origin (Jorgo

50 "Migjeni në shtratin e Prokrustit" (2014).

51 "Mund të përmend Karl Gurakuqin, Dhimitër Shuteriqin, çfarë ka thënë Arshi Pipa në dy raste në vitin '44 dhe në '45. Robert Elsie, gjithashtu, një studiues skrupuloz, por në këtë rast ka shkelur në dërrasë të kalbur, duke e cilësuar Migjenin me prejardhje serbe dhe se nuk e ka ditur gjuhën shqipe."



2008: 157–158). But there was also someone who knew Migjeni personally – Andrea Stefi – who claimed that Migjeni’s ethnic origin was unclear, despite his undoubted “Albanian national aspirations”:

“As is known historically, Millosh Gjergj Nikolla was born in Albania to parents living in Shkodra, but systematically was culturally brought up in Yugoslavia. I don’t have any data of significance to prove that he was Albanian by blood, and this is since it was not my interest directly or indirectly back then, and because he was from within our bosoms, with Albanian national feelings and aspirations”.<sup>52</sup> (Stefi 1954: 4, quoted in Jorgo 2008: 158)

As for the hidden messages of *Kangë në vete*, the core of Jorgo’s interpretation was the verse *kojshitë e mi që i kam farë fis*, (a loose translation from Albanian could be – *neighbors with whom I share blood and tribal affiliation*), i.e. about what neighbors Migjeni is talking about (Albanians from Albania or Albanians from Montenegro or Slavs from the North with whom, as some claim, he shared ethnicity).<sup>53</sup> Jorgo also focuses on the word *Vëri* (Alb. for the *Norther*, wind from the north) and tries to interpret what the *Norther* that blows stands for. So, Jorgo asks who the people the poet calls *neighbors* are, and what the *Norther*, which creeps into their houses and is greeted by them, stands for, and asserts that: “The *Norther* represents an aggressive force. The text, in our opinion, allows the identification of the *Norther* with Serbization – which aimed and aims at the religious and ethnic acculturation of another community. .... The ‘neighbors’.... have been subjected, under the aggressive pressure of the *Norther*, to religious acculturation, ethnic acculturation to a greater or lesser extent, and linguistic acculturation to a certain extent”<sup>54</sup> (Jorgo 2008: 169–170). Jorgo concludes that Migjeni is “not the ‘Slavic spirit that speaks Albanian’ (A. Pipa); he is a great poet, descendant of the once half-Slavicized Albanian spirit that is being fully Albanized again; a hero, as we said above, a superhero, as we say today – of Albanianism”<sup>55</sup> (Jorgo 2008:176).

52 “Siç dihet historikisht Millosh Gjergj Nikolla u lind në Shqipni nga prindër që banuen në Shkodra, por u kulturue sistematikisht në Jugosllavi. Me vërtetue fiziologjikisht gjakun shqiptar të tij nuk disponoj asnjë të dhanun të konsiderueshme, për faktin se atëhere as jam interese direkt o indirekt, sepse e shifje në gjiun tonë me ndjenja e aspirata kombëtare shqiptare”.

53 It might be interesting here to mention that *farë fis* translates into Serbian as *seme i pleme*, which does exist as an expression and is used in vernacular, especially in offensive swear words. The verse could be translated as *I susedi moji koji su mi seme i pleme*. Back in 1969, however, Hilmi Thaçi translated the said verse as *I susedi moji, moj rod svaki* – loose translation into English would be *my neighbors, all of my kin*, which does not factually translate the poet’s line *që i kam farë fis*.

54 “Vëri përfaqëson një fuqi agresive – teksti, sipas nesh, mundëson identifikimin e saj me serbizmin – që ka synuar e synon akulturimin fetar dhe etnik të një bashkësie tjetër....Një pjesë e *kojshive* .... i janë nënshtruar, nën presionin agresiv të Vërit, krejt akulturimit fetar, më shumë a më pak akulturimit etnik dhe njëfarësoj atij gjuhësor”.

55 “...nuk është pra ‘shpirti sllav që fletshqip’ (A. Pipa); ai është poeti i madh, trashëgues i shpirtit shqiptar dikur përgjysmë të sllavizuar që shqiptarizohet i tëri sërish; një hero, thamë pak më lart, një kryehero, themi tani – i shqiptarizmit”.

## Conclusion

We saw above that Jašović and Zlatičanin claimed that Migjeni was of Slavic origin, drawing such a conclusion from his first name, religion and place of origin, the places where he was educated and the language these two authors believe the poet spoke at home. We also know that some Albanian authors also claim that Migjeni was of Slavic origin, although the language of his works and the themes he dealt with in his poetry and short prose make him a full member of Albanian literature. Many Albanian intellectuals deny any connection of Migjeni's family history with Albania's northern and eastern Slavic neighbors, and many delve deeply into the issue to prove that the poet was of pure Albanian blood, which can be the subject of a separate study dealing with the issue of purity of blood of members of a particular community and the socio-political implications of this kind of identity politics propagated by public intellectuals.

However, Migjeni himself, to our knowledge, did not talk about his ethnic origin, nor was he interested in it, if we study his works. He did not write about nation and ethnic pride. He wrote about misery, about destitute women who sold their bodies for money, about hungry village children, about hypocrisy of patriarchal morality, in a word – about corruption of human dignity in the times in which he lived. Literary critics often quote Ismail Kadare, who once wrote that Migjeni's arrival as a writer was like a hurricane, unfortunately interrupted by the poet's untimely death (Kadare 1988, republished in 2015). The *uragani i ndërprerë* (Albanian for interrupted hurricane) is praised to this day, both inside and outside Albania, for the uniqueness of his poems and short stories, which, in the words of literary critic Gazmend Krasniqi, continuously require *lexime te reja/new readings* for their everlasting impact on Albanian literature (Krasniqi 2013). Kadare had an interesting view on the matter of Migjeni's belonging:

“The case of Migjeni shows that the Albanian universe together with the Albanian language, the universe and the language that we habitually trample over, has an extremely strong power to absorb and integrate. Migjeni, by origin, by education, and by language could be a Yugoslav writer. The neighboring country could give him space and an opportunity apparently greater than what could give him the harsh, poor and rebellious Albania. But he, regardless of all that advantage, even against his own interests, made his choice” (Kadare 2004: 59–60, quoted in Jorgo 2008: 145).<sup>56</sup>

If we examine the historical context of Migjeni's arrival into the Albanian cultural life, we will see that it took place at a time of socio-political and

56 “Rasti i Migjenit tregon se universi shqiptar bashkë me gjuhën shqipe, ai univers e ajo gjuhë që ne e kemi bërë zakon ta shkelim me këmbë, ka fuqi thithëse e integruese tepër të fortë. Migjeni, për nga prejardhja, për nga studimet, e për nga gjuha, mund të ishte një shkrimtar jugosllav. Vendi fqinj mund t'i jepte atij hapësirë e mundësi, në dukje, më të madhe se Shqipëria e sertë, e varfër dhe kryeneçe. Por ai, jashtë çdo përfitimi, madje kundër tij, e bëri zgjedhjen e vet”.

economic turbulence in Europe. In his 1978 essay on Migjeni, written in exile, Arshi Pipa noted that Migjeni's return home after his studies in Yugoslavia coincided with political changes in Albania and the rise of nationalism led by the Zogu regime, and that Migjeni found himself caught between the two sides:

“His first year of teaching, 1933–1934, coincided with the politics of nationalism and laicization of the school system in Albania. The poet completely agreed with the politics of laicization, but nationalism created a problem of conscience for him. By teaching in a Serbian enclave following the guidelines of the new policy, he came to become a tool of the government to denationalize (i.e. assimilate, S.R.) the enclave. The Yugoslav consulate in Shkodra, which pressured Migjeni not to accept the teacher position, could only see this as a betrayal from one of their former scholarship holders, himself of Slavic origin, who damaged the nationalist interests of Yugoslavia.”<sup>57</sup> (Pipa 2022: 86)

Arshi Pipa's words about Migjeni *shpirti sllav që flet shqip/Slavic spirit who speaks Albanian* (Pipa 2022: 61–71) have been frequently quoted by those who trust Pipa's judgment (about the poet's links with the Slavs) as well as by those who deny such links. As noted above, Migjeni himself did not seem to have had as much interest in the subject as those who came after him onto the cultural scene, both in Albania and in neighboring countries. Nevertheless, the interest in him and his legacy shows that he has been *shpirti që flet/a talking spirit* all this time, whose name, by mere invocation in the public sphere, opens the door for society to talk about itself and about others. Migjeni, therefore, remains a cryptic figure because of the cacophony of public discourses about his poetic legacy tangled with disputes over his ideological, religious, and above all, ethno-national belonging, which not only reveal how exclusive identity politics still is in the Slav-Albanian domain of interaction, but also provide an insight into the rifts within Albanian society – be they political, ideological or rooted in class and ethnicity – which can be a separate subject of study.

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57 “Viti i tij i parë i mësimdhënies, 1933–1934, përkoi me nacionalizmin dhe laicizimin e sistemit shkollor shqiptar. Poeti ishte në pajtim të plotë me politikën e laicizimit, porse politika e nacionalizmit i krijoi një problem të ndërjegjes. Duke dhënë mësim në një enklavë serbe sipas udhëzimeve të politikës së re arriti të bëhej vegël e qeverisë për ta çkombëtizuar atë enklavë. Konsullata jugosllave në Shkodër, që ushtroi presion mbi Migjenin për të mos pranuar postin e mësuesit, mund ta shihte vetëm si tradhti shërbimin e njërit prej ish-bursistëve të vet me origjinë sllave, që i dëmtonte interesat nacionaliste jugosllave”.

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**Slaviša Raković**

## **Miđeni: Govoreći duh: Tekstualno-(n)etnografski pregled biografskih prikaza etničkog porekla pesnika Miloša Đerđa Nikole**

Miloš Đerđ Nikola – Miđeni, poznati albanski pesnik i pisac kratkih priča (1911–1938), u popularnom diskursu često nazivan pesnikom bede (na albanskom – *poeti i mjerimit*), slavljén je zbog inovativnog uticaja na albansku književnost, pesničke jedinstvenosti i hrabrog bavljenja društveno kontroverznim i tabu temama ondašnje Albanije. Miđeni je odrastao u pravoslavnoj porodici u Skadru, a formalno obrazovanje sticao na srpskom jeziku (u Skadru, Baru i Bitolju). Pesme i kratke priče objavljivao je na albanskom jeziku. Ovaj rad se bavi različitim biografskim narativima o Miđeniju napisanim u Albaniji, Crnoj Gori i Srbiji, a u vezi sa njegovim etničkim poreklom – o kojem sam Miđeni, prema dostupnim izvorima, nikada nije pričao. Rad pruža i pregled savremenih onlajn diskusija o Miđenijevoj ličnosti, njegovoj književnoj aktivnosti, posleratnoj i savremenoj recepciji njegova nasleđa u Albaniji i regionu, uključujući i spekulacije o njegovom etničkom identitetu. Zaključak je da ove diskusije razotkrivaju opstajanje isključive politike identiteta u slovensko-albanskim odnosima, ali nude uvid i u neke unutrašnje podele u samom albanskom društvu.

**Ključne reči:** Miđeni, albanska književnost, albansko-slovenski odnosi, politika identiteta, etnicitet

Primljeno: 03. 10. 2024.

Odobreno: 09. 12. 2024.