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## IS AN ALBANIAN MAN'S *BESA* HIS BOND? – A PAREMIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF *BESA*

**Abstract:** “An Englishman’s word is his bond”. What about the Albanian concept of *besa*? *Besa*, regarded as the holiest word and a precious value in Albanian culture, is reflected in Albanian personal names, legends and ballads, customary laws, and the works of both English and Albanian writers such as Edith Durham and Ismail Kadare. It is also present in museums dedicated to the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust, in cultural and political events, and in media coverage, such as the BBC article “What can Albania teach us about trust?” Considered the cornerstone of the Albanian code of honour in past centuries and a defining virtue of Albanian identity, *besa* has generated a rich corpus of proverbs. This study explores proverbs about *besa* in the Albanian language, as depicted in Albanian written sources, primarily dictionaries such as “Fjalë të urta të popullit shqiptar” (“Wise sayings of Albanian people” by Jorgo Panajoti and Agron Xhagolli, 1983) and “Fjalor i Shqipes së Sotme” (Dictionary of Current Albanian Language, 2002). The aim is to portray the many nuances and attitudes encapsulated by *besa* in these proverbs. The discussion highlights the richness of Albanian proverbs about “trust, troth, the pledged word, honour, the solemn promise and bond”, i.e. *besa*, by examining their content and cultural significance.

**Keywords:** Albanian proverbs, *besa*, paremiology, promise, value, culture

## 1. Introduction

In the context of English lexicology instruction at the University of Tirana, students are often asked to provide examples of authentic Albanian proverbs. After mentioning some of the most frequently used proverbs, students are then presented with their English equivalents. This process frequently leads to the emergence of proverbs such as “*The religion of Albania is Albanianism, Besa is stronger than steel, Albanian besa is worth more than gold*”. The recurrent appearance of these proverbs highlights the centrality of *besa* in Albanian culture and inspired the present study. *Besa* is roughly translated as ‘promise’ or ‘word of honour’. It is a recurring theme in Albanian culture featuring prominently in Albanian customary law, literature, history, ethnography, and albanological studies, and has significant implications throughout Albanian society. Consequently, a substantial proverb corpus stems from *besa*. In their ideo-thematic proverb collection “Fjalë të urta të popullit shqiptar” (“Wise sayings of Albanian people”, 1983) paroemiographers Jorgo Panajoti and Agron Xhagolli have listed many proverbs about *besa* (more than 160 proverbs) which clearly indicates the preoccupation with its meaning, value and importance in the life of Albanians. The aim of this paper is to investigate proverbs with *besa* as the keyword (45 proverbs), analyze the proverbs’ content and cultural features by drawing on the many nuances and attitudes associated with the concept of *besa*. This cultural treasure, closely tied to the historical development of the Albanian nation, customs, ethnography, religious beliefs, mythologies and literature may certainly contribute to an understanding of the worldview and culture of Albanian people. In conducting this analysis, two perspectives are considered: 1. Care must be taken when looking at proverbs as expressing aspects of a certain worldview or mentality that no stereotypical conclusions about a so-called national character are drawn. There are so many proverbs from classical, biblical and medieval times current in various cultures that it would be foolish to think of them as reflecting some imagined national character, as for example Chinese or Finnish (Lister 1874-1875; Kuusi 1967) 2. “Nevertheless, the frequent use of certain proverbs in a particular culture could be used together with other social and

cultural indicators to formulate valid generalizations” (Mieder 2004: 137. See also Mieder 2019).

## **2. Methodology**

Several methods and approaches are employed in this paper. As the primary aim of this paper is to analyse the themes present in Albanian proverbs concerning *besa*, the content analysis approach (within the qualitative research) has been deemed appropriate, as it allows for valuable historical and cultural insights. In this process, proverbs have been traced to their origins in customary laws, history, cultural traditions, legends and literary traditions, and, where possible, to their known or attributed authors. Forty-five proverbs with the keyword *besa* are analysed thematically. This article is intended as a presentation of *besa* proverbs as texts that offer a window into a culture under-researched in terms of its proverbial wisdom. In order to understand many of the semantic aspects, the finer linguistic and cultural points that the proverbs try to convey, the lingua-cultural method has been adopted. Relevant literature that covers linguistics, history of Albanian people, Albanian ethno-culture, cultural anthropology, history of Albanian literature, literature, etc. has been consulted. To facilitate a deeper understanding of various nuances, contextualized references, historical references and explanatory comments are provided.

The Albanian proverbs have been translated into English by the author, with careful attention to preserving the metaphors and images as used in the authentic material. In addition, the English equivalent/similar ones are provided where possible. In attempting to lay out the richness of Albanian proverbs on *besa*, it is hoped that this study will encourage further comparative research, including investigations into geographical distribution, sources, and related topics.

## **3. The semantics of *besa***

The content of proverbs and words naturally leads to lexicographical sources. The treatment of the word *besa* in dictionaries is far from straightforward, as evidenced by the three principal dictionaries consulted for this study. While the polysemous na-

ture of the word is reflected in all three, certain meanings are labelled as archaic in the “Oxford Albanian-English Dictionary” (1998: 59), while the “Dictionary of Current Albanian Language” (2002: 103-104) highlights its significance in Albanian ethnography, and the “Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture” by R. Elsie (2001: 35-36) describes it as a popular custom. Although some meanings are indeed becoming obsolete, they remain important for understanding the depth or intensity of this virtue over time, particularly as it approaches modernity. The meanings of *besa* according to Oxford Albanian-English Dictionary (1998) are as follows:

Besa

1. pledge, word of honour
2. oath
3. (old) pledge taken by a family to take revenge on the murderer of a member of that family within a particular period of time; truce between the two parties to a blood-feud; truce period; the protection enjoyed by a guest<sup>1</sup> during his stay with the host; protection, custody, aegis
4. (colloq) religious faith, faith
5. Alliance; faithfulness
6. Trust, belief

*Besa-besë* *nf* solemn promise, sacred pledge, word of honour

In the “Dictionary of current Albanian language”, *besa* is presented as a noun with five distinct meanings:

1. The sworn promise with an uncompromising commitment not to be violated, a word of honour to fulfill an obligation one undertakes; archaic. A covenant; faithfulness. *Albanian besa. Man's besa. The word of besa. A man of besa. To give one's besa. To violate besa. Albanian besa is worth more than gold. Man's besa weighs more than the rock. Bond by besa. Like the serpent's besa* meaning not to be trusted.

<sup>1</sup> The guest in the Albanian culture refers to anyone who knocks on the door. “... and the guest, as the symbol of otherness, receives full attention and respect from the owner of the house. Even the greatest enemy loses his ‘negative’ connotation the moment he steps into the house” (Dingo, 2007; Schmitt, 2020; Lauria, Flora, Guza: 172).

2. A total trust in someone, bona fide, in good faith. *To lay besa (to entrust). To give besa to trust. I hold/have besa I am convinced.*
3. (ethnography) (in blood feuding) the commitment by the family of the deceased towards the *gjaksor* (the one who killed) not to take blood within a certain period of time; a suspension of blood-taking by giving one's word by both parties; the time that this cease-fire lasts; the protection that is given to the guest by the host as long as s/he is accommodated in his house. *To give one's besa. Bond one's besa. Extended one's besa. Destroy/violate one's besa. Kill someone in besa. Break one's besa.*
4. Colloquial. Religious faith, religion. *The religion of Albanian is Albanianism.*
5. Used as an adjective. Someone who keeps one's promise, trustworthy. *A man of besa. A woman of besa.*  
*\*Për besë! Upon besa/for besa's sake"* a) upon one's word of honour; b) really, I mean it. *S'pata besë* (I had no *besa*) I could wait no more. *E preu (hëngri) në besë* (to violate one's *besa*) a) betray b) did not keep one's sworn word

In addition, the dictionary notes the use of the word *besa* not only as a noun, but even as a particle used colloquially to mean "indeed, honestly" as in the example *Besa, çupë si ajo nuk gjen.* (*Indeed, you will find no girl like her.*)

The word *besa* appears in compound that describe a person's character in terms of reliability and trustworthiness, typically falling into the binary opposition of reliable/trustworthy vs. unreliable/untrustworthy. Examples include: *besëkeq* (of bad *besa*), *besëmbajtës* (trustworthy, reliable), *besëmirë* (of good *besa*), *besëpakë* (of little *besa*), *besëplotë* (full of trust), *besëpre-rë* (backstabbing), *besëqen* (whose *besa* is like that of a wretched dog, unreliable) and many more.

Additionally, there are compound nouns such as *besëlidhje* (covenant), *besa-besë* (word of honour); derived words such as *besim* (conviction; religion; bias), *besimtar* (religious), *besnik* (faithful), etc.

These observations indicate that *besa* is a highly nuanced word, frequently used, emotionally charged, highly productive in word formation and featuring in all registers.

Proper names such as *Besa* (for girls) and *Besnik*, *Besart* (for boys meaning reliable, of golden *besa*) are very popular in Albania. In his "Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture", Elsie defines *besa* as a popular custom:

*Besa*. Popular custom. The *besa*, Alb. *besë*, def. *besa*, is one's word of honour, a sworn oath, a pledge or a cease-fire. In Albanian culture, the *besa* was regarded as something sacred and its violation was quite unthinkable. The *besa* was not only a moral virtue, but also a particularly important institution in Albanian customary law. Among the feuding tribes of the north, it offered the only form of real protection and security to be had. A *besa* could be given between individuals or feuding families for a specific period of time in order for them to settle other urgent affairs. It could also be concluded between the tribes as a cease-fire between periods of fighting. The *besa*, taken to extremes, however, could have terrible repercussions. The Rilindja author Sami bey Frashëri (1850-1904) exemplified this in his Turkish-language play, *Besa yahud ahde vefa* (*Besa or the fulfilment of the pledge*), published in Constantinople in 1875 and translated into English as *Pledge of honor*, an Albanian tragedy (New York 1945). In this rather melodramatic work, we are confronted with the tragic dilemma of an Albanian father who prefers to kill his own son rather than break his *besa*. Despite some excesses and exceptions, the Albanian *besa* is an institution which until recently was generally respected by the Albanians and of which they can still be proud. Amusingly enough, the Turkish expression *arnavut besa* 1 "Albanian *besa*" is translated in the Redhouse Turkish-English dictionary as "an agreement sure to be quickly broken"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> This phraseological unit should be considered within the historical context. It is amusing also to notice that many proverbs with the Turk as a keyword in Albanian proverbs show that "Turks are not to be trusted". The earliest recorded version of the Albanian proverb *S' duhetë me zanë besë as ujit, as turkut* (*One should not trust water and the Turks*) dates back to 1635, compiled by Frang Bardhi in "Dictionarium Latino-Epiroticum". This proverb appears even in the later collection of Albanian proverbs (Panajoti and Xhagolli 1983: 41). Another mention of *besa* in proverbs by Bardhi in 1635 is *S'bet besë ndë këtë shekullë* (*There is no trust left in these centuries*) found as *S'bet besë ndë këtë shekull* (*There is no trust left in this century*) in the manuscript of Nikollë Keta (Niccolo Chetta, 1741-1803) which should be put within the historical context, as well. (For more information see B. Demiraj 2008: 55-72)

The Croatian priest Lovro Mihačević O.F.M., who lived in the mountains of northern Albania in the late nineteenth century, described the institution of the *besa* in the following terms:

The *besa*, equivalent to our word of honour, is sacred to the Albanians. Anyone who does not keep his *besa* is no man at all, and certainly not a gentleman. The *besa* is made between individuals as a pledge that they will protect one another. It can happen that two or more individuals who are in the middle of a blood feud, will give one another their *besa* for a certain period of time, during which the feud and any other hostile actions must be put aside. The Albanian would rather die than break his word of honour, especially if he has taken someone under his protection... The following happened in a village I know. A guide had given his guest a *besa*. They arrived together in the village where the visitor had business, which he concluded successfully. It was the guide's duty to accompany his guest from the village where the latter had done his business to the safety of the border, and then to leave him. When they got outside the village, the guest rashly told his guide, "You can go back home now because I can find my way alone." "Alright," replied the guide, "you don't need me anymore. My *besa* has thus come to an end" and, cocking his rifle, shot the man who had been his guest up to that moment (L. Mihačević 1913, p.24-25). (cf. A. Siljani 1907; L. Mihačević 1913, p.24-27; A. Jovičević 1923, p.101-103; D. Kurti 1932; Z. Catapano 1943; S. Pupovci 1968a; D. Shala 1985 a; S. Tabaku 1978; S. Schwandner-Sievers 1993, 1996b, 1999). (Elsie 2001: 35-36)

It is noteworthy that the lexicographical treatment of *besa* in the three dictionaries does not cover different historical periods, and in fact, they were compiled within a four-year span. Nonetheless, there is a highly similar semantic structure in the organization of the lexical meanings. In the Oxford Albanian-English Dictionary (1998) meanings are listed without being illustrated in certain contextual use, and aspects of *besa*'s combinability are not reflected. In the "Dictionary of current Albanian language" (2002), three proverbs appear with reference (keywords) to Albanian *besa*, (Albanian) man and Albanian religion: "*Albanian besa is worth more than gold*", "*Man's besa weighs more than the rock*", "*The religion of Albanian is Albanianism*". In addi-

tion, the contextual use of this polysemantic word is provided in different senses.

Furthermore, in his "Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture" (2001), Elsie contextualizes the meaning of the word not only as a popular custom in Albania, but most importantly as "an *institution* which until *recently* was generally *respected* by the Albanians and of which they can still be *proud*"; therefore, as a construct of identity and a cultural aspect viewed and analyzed by other cultures/outsideers, as well.

#### ***4. Besa in customary law, history and literature***

An understanding of the polysemanticity of *besa* (as reflected in proverbs) is facilitated by an understanding of the culture and history of the Albanian people. Drawing on several comprehensive studies, such as "The History of Albanian People I, II, III" by the Academy of Sciences of Albania (2007), "Rebels, Believers, Survivors. Studies in the history of the Albanians" by the eminent Oxford scholar Noel Malcolm (2020), "A concise history of Albania" by Bernd J. Fischer and Oliver Jens Schmitt (2022), etc., it is essential to highlight certain historical facts and cultural features. These include Albania's role as a meeting-ground of religions and cultures, its rich traditional folk culture, the resilience of the oral Albanian customary laws and the emergence of their collection in a written form, the remarkable acts of rescuing (all<sup>3</sup>) Jews during the Holocaust, all of which are grounded in *besa*.

In a very synthesized way, Sir Noel Malcolm gives a very insightful view of the history of Albanian people as a meeting-ground of religions and a crossroad of cultures and interests:

For all the contingent reasons, the history of the Albanians may seem, to the casual observer, a rather self-enclosed and inward-looking affair. But the truth is the opposite: this is a history that radiates outwards in all kinds of directions. The Albanian lands have long been a meeting-ground of religions, and Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam all connected Albanians with larger

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<sup>3</sup> See Sarner, Harvey *Rescue in Albania. One hundred percent of Jews rescued in Albania during the Holocaust*. Cathedral City CA: Brunswick Press, 1997.



currents of culture and thought outside their own region. For much of their history, the Albanian lands were a crossroads of cultures and interests – a channel through which Venetian and other Italian powers interacted with the Ottoman Balkans from an early stage, a place of interest to the Habsburgs over several centuries as they tried to extend their own Balkan influence, and a focus for Greek and Slav ambitions both during the later period of Ottoman rule and, crucially, at the time of that empire's disintegration. ..." (Malcolm 2020: x).

The specialist in Albanian studies, R. Elsie draws on the richness of the Albanian folk culture:

Indeed, the historical, political, economic and cultural development of the Albanians has been so arduous that those who know them well, can do little but marvel at how they have managed to survive as a people at all.

Only in one sense have the Albanians been rich. Their traditional folk culture, which evolved over the centuries in relative isolation, offers a surprising wealth of elements. (Elsie 2001: vii)

In "The history of Albanian people III" we find that an important part in the history of Albanian people and their ethnography is drawn on the compilation of Albanian customary laws:

An extensive and praiseworthy work in the discipline of folklore and ethnography was undertaken and fulfilled by the Franciscan priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi, who collected and systemized with many detailed explanations one of the monumental works of Albanian customary laws "The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjinit", published in 1933 after his death. Sh. Gjeçovi left many published and unpublished works on Albanian traditions and customs of birth, marriage, death, collective wailing (*gjëma*), hospitality and Albanian *besa*, on wise sayings and saluting expressions. He dedicated most of his energies to the study of Albanian customary law (The Academy of Sciences of Albania 2007: 417).

Tarifa (2008) notes, "Gjeçov's work is genuinely a professional piece of ethnographic anthropology". Translator Fox observes that the Code of Lekë Dukagjini is "the expression and reflection

of the Albanian character, a character which embodies an uncompromising morality based on justice, honor, and respect for oneself and others” (Fox 1989: xix; Tarifa: 2008). Tarifa highlights that “The cornerstone of the Kanun was the concept of *Besa*—a term very rich in meaning and use, which means oath, faith, trust, protection, truce, word of honor, or all of these together—since honor was the primary and most important cohesive institution of Albanian social fabric (See Tarifa: 2008).

Furthermore, Mary Edith Durham, an early British ethnographer of Southeastern Europe, through a comparative analysis “remembered that many of the tribes of my own land believe in planchette and table-turning – consult palmists and globe-gazers, are ‘Christian Scientists’ and ‘High Thinkers’ – and reflected that all the training of all the schools had but little removed a large mass of the British public from the intellectual standpoint of High Albania, whereas for open-handed generosity and hospitality the Albanian ranks incomparably higher” (Durham 1985:192, Delouis 2022).

She experienced the Albanian proverb of hospitality *Buk<sup>4</sup>, kryp e zemer (Bread, salt, and our hearts is all we can offer)*:

.... When I rose to go, the old man asked if we had a roof for the night. “We are poor. Bread, salt, and our hearts is all we can offer, but you are welcome to stay as long as you wish.” It gave me joy to know that even in the bitterest corners of the earth there is so much of human kindness. (Durham 1909, trans by R. Hysa and Xh. Lloshi 1991: 131)

Most notably, numerous acts of kindness and compassion followed by many courageous acts of saving thousands of Jewish lives by the entire Albanian community during the Nazi occupation, are attributed to the code of honour, *besa*, deeply rooted in Albanian culture. There is so much humanism well-couched in *besa*. Many stories of *besa* and the rescue of Jews during WWII have emerged, such as those highlighted in the BBC Studio Podcast production for BBC Sounds “History’s secret heroes -10. Arslan Rezniqi and the Besa Code”, hosted by Helena Bon-

<sup>4</sup> Bread is a symbol of hospitality in many Albanian proverbs.

ham Carter, which sheds light on an extraordinary story from World War Two rooted in Albanian *besa*.

The assistance provided to Jews by the entire Albanian community (and the fragile Albanian government) in the face of extreme adversity should be understood as a matter of national honour for Albanians. Such knowledge has become proverbial:

Indeed, The Albanian Embassy in Berlin continued to issue visas to Jews up to the end of 1938, at a time when no other European country was willing to take them in. Jewish refugees were mostly well looked after by the local population and survived the German occupation of Albania (1943-1944) unscathed. Indeed, it is said that during the Nazi occupation not one single Jew in hiding in Albania was betrayed or handed over to the Germans, an admirable reflection of how well the Albanians adhered to their traditional customs of hospitality and *besa*. (Elsie 2001:141)

Historians like Bernd J. Fischer and Oliver J. Schmitt draw on this fact, as well:

Neubacher recognized how unpopular fascism was in Albania and determined that it would play only a limited role. No Albanian fascist party was required, no domestic labour service was established, and at least until late in the German occupation, the Germans generally refrained from hunting, deporting and exterminating Jews. This allowed the Albanians to hide and protect a considerable number of both Albanian and foreign Jews, for which they have rightly been honored by the Israeli government” (Fischer and Schmitt 2022: 261).

This historical example of basic human solidarity has grasped the attention of many scholars, the photographer Norman Gershman, the institution of the Museum of Holocaust History in Yad Vashem and other museums, American and British media, filmmakers, etc. Every study, piece of information or story, exhibition at the museums or universities in Albania, Jerusalem, UK, USA, Australia, etc., about the rescue of the Jews in Albania most certainly lays great emphasis on the unique value of Albanian *besa*. Thus, Albanian *besa* transcends several boundaries and borders.

*Besa* is an integral part of Albanian cultural literacy. The virtue and valour of *besa* is penned by writers, too. One of these is the British romantic writer, George Gordon Byron in his “Child Harold’s Pilgrimage”. In the Albanian translation, the words in italics encapsulate *besa*.

Table 1. Child Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto the Second, Stanza LXV in English and Albanian

English	Albanian
Fierce are Albania’s children, yet they lack Not virtues, were those virtues more mature Where is the foe that ever saw their back? Who can so well the toil of war endure? Their native fastnesses not more secure Than they in doubtful time of troublous need: Their wrath how deadly! But their <i>friendship sure</i> , When <i>Gratitude or Valour</i> bids them bleed, Unshaken rushing on where’er their chief may lead (Lord Byron 1812: 81)	Të rreptë bijtë e Shqipes! Por vetitë Nuk u mungojn’ veç t’ishin më të arrira: Armiku ua pa kurrizin ndonjëherë? Kush e duron si ata mundimn’ e luftës? Shkëmbinjt’ e tyre s’jan’ më të patundur Nga ata në çast rreziku dhe nevoje; Ç’armik për vdekje, po sa <i>miq besnikë!</i> Kur <i>besa a nderi</i> i thurret të derdhin gjakun, Si trima, turren ku t’i çojë i pari i tyre. (Trans by S. Luarasi 1956, republished 2004: 74)

While many Albanian literary works elaborate on *besa* (permeating Albanian ballads and myths, Albanian National Awakening, etc.), one of the Albanian writers with a broad international reputation, Ismail Kadare (1936-2024), whose themes draw heavily on Albanian history, politics, folklore and ethnicity has masterfully given an in-depth portrayal of *besa* proverbs in his works “Broken April” (based on the proverb *An Albanian’s house is the dwelling of God and the guest*) and “The ghost-rider” (based on an ancient Albanian ballad known by all Albanians, with the Leonore motive which draws on the proverb *An Albanian might die, but he will never break his promise* with many of its variants

found in the corpus of *besa* proverbs). Selected excerpts from these works are presented below.

In “Broken April” we read about the sacredness of the guest:

... He talked to her about the rule of hospitality, in general referring to all the provisions concerning the guest within one’s gates, which for an Albanian was sacred, quite beyond comparison with anything else. “Do you remember the definition of a house in the *Kanun*?” he said. “*An Albanian’s house is the dwelling of God and the guest.*” Of God and the guest, you see. So, before it is the house of its master, it is the house of one’s guest. The guest, in an Albanian’s life, represents the supreme ethical category, more important than blood relations. One may pardon the man who spill the blood of one’s father or of one’s son, but never the blood of a guest. “A guest is really a demi-god,” he went on after a while, “and the fact that any one at all can suddenly become a guest does not diminish but rather accentuates his divine character. The fact that this divinity is acquired suddenly, in a single night simply by knocking at a door, makes it even more authentic. The moment a humble wayfarer, his pack on his shoulder, knocks at your door and gives himself up to you as a guest, he is instantly transformed into an extraordinary being, an inviolable sovereign, a law-maker, the light of the world. And the suddenness of the transformation is absolutely characteristic nature of the divine. Did not the gods of the ancient Greeks make their appearance suddenly and in the most unpredictable manner? That is just the way the guest appears at an Albanian’s door. Like all the gods he is an enigma, and he comes directly from the realms of destiny or fate – call it what you will. A knock at the door can bring about the survival or the extinction of whole generations. That is what the guest is to the Albanians of the mountains.” (Kadare 1990: 75-77)

In “The ghost rider” (Doruntina), in order to economize with the space, the extracted excerpt lays emphasis on the proverb *An Albanian might die, but he will never break his promise*, so it reads:

That was what the *besa* meant. That was how Konstandin saw it. He considered the *besa* a bond linking all that was sublime, and he felt that once it and other similar laws had spread and held sway in every aspect of life, then external laws, with their corresponding

institutions, would be shed naturally, just as snake sloughs off its old skin.

Thus spoke Konstandin on those memorable afternoons they used to pass at the New Inn, where he went on and on about Albanian-ness. Perorating, or as some wits put it, albanating. "So that's how it is," he would say, "for my part, I shall give my mother my *besa* to bring Doruntine back to her from her husband's home whenever she desires. And whatever happens – if I am lying on my deathbed, if I have but one hand or leg, if I have lost my sight, even if... I *will never break that promise*." (Kadare 1988: 143-144)

## 5. *Besa in Albanian Proverbs*

The polysemanticity of the word *besa* ensures that proverbs cantered on *besa* display *significant* "polysituativity, polyfunctionality, and polysemanticity" (Krikmann 2009: 15–50).

Several themes such as Albanianism (Albanian identity), honour, trust and integrity, fortitude, bravery, commitment (to marriage, friends, etc.), loyalty, hospitality, and challenges that beget embracing *besa* feature in these proverbs. As we explore the themes, issues of polysituativity and polyfunctionality are either inferred or explicitly analyzed. In general, we can say that the function and context of use for many *besa* proverbs is to praise, advise, warn, reprimand, etc.

There is one nonmetaphorical tautological proverb such as "*Fjala fjalë e besa besë*" (The word is the word and *besa* is *besa*), which serves to emphasize the importance of keeping one's word and fulfilling promises.

### 5.1. *The power of besa*

In Albanian proverbs, *besa* is hard and fast. It is such a powerful bond that it transcends boundaries of death and is strong and unyielding like iron. It bestows honour, success, dignity, riches and hope on those who possess *besa*. Conversely, individuals lacking *besa* are portrayed as having no religion, living a lifeless existence, and being easily forgotten.

(1) *Besa asht ma e fortë se vdekja. Besa is stronger than death.*

- (2) *Besa e njerit do të jenë hekurit. One's besa is as strong as iron.*
- (3) *Besa e njeriut – çilci i nderit. One's besa is key to one's honour.*
- (4) *Besa s'kthehet. One can never violate besa.*
- (5) *Besa s'lot. Besa is hard and fast.*
- (6) *Besën e mban toka, jo ma nieri. Besa is kept by the earth, let alone man (man in the sense of human being).*
- (7) *Gjithkush e ka besën për vete. Besa is part of who you really are.*
- (8) *E hupe besën, e hupe shpresën. You lose your besa, you lose hope.*
- (9) *Ku është shpresa, atje është edhe besa. Where there is hope, there is besa. (In this variant of the previous proverb, we find that besa and hope go hand in hand together)*
- (10) *Kur jep besën, mos lyp pjesën. Once thou promise, never beg thy share.*
- (11) *Kush luan në besë, do të ketë pendesë. One shall always come to repentance for the promise not kept.*
- (12) *Mbanie besën ndër shenjë veti, s'ka c'u bën kurrfarë mileti. Own thy besa, no one shall get at you.*
- (13) *Muri luan, besa s'luan. The wall can move, besa never shall.*
- (14) *Peta lara-lara; besa faqebardha. Pies can be colorful, besa is pure white (makes you white-cheeked as literally translated – an Albanian word for a successful and honorable person)*
- (15) *Si të kesh besë, nuk je fukura. If you have besa, you will never be poor.*
- (16) *Këmba e thyer e besa e kthyer nuk ndreqen. The broken leg and the broken besa are hard to fix.*
- (17) *E hupe besën, e hupe rresën. No besa, no life.*
- (18) *Kush ka gjetë një mik bestar, ka gjetë një hazne. S/he who finds a friend of besa, finds a treasure.*
- (19) *Pa besë s'kie kurrxha: as kie zot, as kie pushtet, as kie mik. No besa, no religion, no power, no friends/guests.*
- (20) *Mos e humb besën, se të humbet varri. Lose not thy besa, for thy tomb shall be forgotten.*

As the messages and implications encoded in *besa* proverbs are explored, it is worth analyzing some formal elements regarding the proverb texts in this subsection. The use of the Albanian semantically unmarked noun or the generic noun *njeri(u)* (a human being, a person) and the indefinite pronouns (gender neutral pronouns) *kush*, *gjithkush* (whoever, one) show that *besa* is a value not specific to either masculine or feminine gender. Furthermore, both the meaning and structure of these proverbs emphasize the qualities and power of *besa* rather than focusing on a male – female dichotomy, which becomes more prominent in the following subsection. One significant remark that may be formulated here is that *besa* is not an inherently male or female characteristic, despite the fact that there are many elements in Albanian traditions and culture which are female-unfriendly. Moving on this trail, reference should be made to the study by Tirta, which seems to supply some details about women in Albanian culture. Notwithstanding that patriarchy has manifested itself in many aspects of Albanian culture until recently (most notably in customary laws), Tirta dwells especially on two displays of women's *besa* in Albanian customary laws:

- The Albanian woman had the right to take under her protection a man (in case he asks for that), so he could travel or walk alongside her and nothing menacing could happen to him.
- Even in cases of a shootout or gunfight back in time, the woman could intervene holding a child and call for the men to cease fire imposing her authority (Tirta 2016: 479-480).

Upon closer examination, in addition to the “protection” and “truce” context, when *besa* is used adjectively meaning *trustworthy* and *keeping one's promise*, in Section 3, in the “Dictionary of current Albanian language”, meaning 5 we find *man of besa*, *woman of besa* equally. This is best illustrated by the power of *besa* bond reflected most evidently in the marriage bond. The Albanian proverb makes use of the metonymy *kunorë* crown/flower garland to refer to the marriage bond.



(21) *Besa e kunorës – ma e madhja besë.* (*The marriage bond – the biggest bond*) (More literally: *The besa of the crown/flower garland – the biggest besa*)

Considering the marriage bond as the most powerful shows a lot about the commitment, uncompromising morality and integrity that the Albanian men and women should show reciprocally. The reading/s of this proverb should be seen in the light of the solidarity of the family, of one's kith and kin and society in general.

While *besa* and women are not rendered explicitly in the content of *besa* proverbs (but rather implicitly or wrapped in the notion of human being or honour in general in some other proverbs e.g. *Gruen e mban ndera e jo buka - Women feed on honour and not bread, etc.*), there are nine proverbs which are evidently loaded with the qualities and character of men, deep-seated in the concept of *besa*.

### 5.2. *Besa and man*

According to Albanian traditions, the “Albanian man” is recognized as such, or as a “man of the earth/soil” in regional social contexts, if he demonstrates wisdom, weighs his words carefully, gives his *besa* (keeps his promise, provides protection, etc.), highly values honour as an ethical-moral institution, is hospitable, courageous and a patriot, is not dodgy in social work or towards others, a hard-working man who never cheats, helps the poor in material and spiritual terms and never looks down on them. A man who fails to embody these virtues is not considered a true man, but merely a male in physical form. He is never born worthless, but can become so by his vices and inhumane or discourteous deeds (Tirta 2016: 475).

Table 2. *Besa* and man

Albanian proverbs	English translation
<i>Besa e burrit – pesha e gurit.</i>	<i>Men's besa weighs more than the rock.</i>
<i>Besa e burrit thyen edhe gurin.</i>	<i>Man's besa breaks even the strongest rock.</i>
<i>Besa – e burrave.</i>	<i>Besa is the virtue of man.</i>
<i>Burrë asht ai qi ka besë e njerzi, e jo ai qi ka hijeshi.</i>	<i>Besa and humanity, not charms, are the virtues of man. (The English equivalent would be: Handsome is as handsome does).</i>
<i>Lisin e naltson kmesa, e burrin e naltson besa.</i>	<i>An oak by its crown, a man by his besa.</i>
<i>Trimi trimit gjithmonë besë i nxe.</i>	<i>The brave always trusts the brave.</i>
<i>Shumë burra janë, po jo gjithkush besë mban.</i>	<i>Men – of different sorts; not all live by besa.</i>
<i>Burri për besët, e kau për veshit.</i>	<i>A man by besa, an ox by its ears.</i>
<i>Kalin e kallxon ngarkesa e burrin e kallxon besa</i>	<i>A steed by its carriage, a man by his besa.</i>

The proverb *Ke ansht shpata, atje asht besa* (*To hold onto your pledge, hold onto your sword*) highlights the importance of bravery and fortitude that *besa* demands in cases of danger, a virtue and valour penned by Lord Byron as already mentioned (See Table 1).

### 5.3. *Besa* and guests/friends

Loyalty to the *miku* (Albanian for guest and friend) runs deep in Albanian proverbs. This principle originates directly from the customary laws passed orally throughout centuries, most notably codified in The Code of Lekë Dukagjini. In Book 8, “Honour”, which is divided into “Personal Honour” and “Social Honour”, articles 96-100 set out detailed provisions determining the behaviour and attitude towards guests. Article 96 (point 602) starts with the proverbial *Shpija e Shqyptarit asht e Zotit dhe e mikut* (*An Albanian's house is the dwelling of God and the guest*) (Gjeçov 1933; trans by Ajazi in a bilingual version, 2016: 66). Guests can be interpreted first and foremost as sacred, a theme

masterfully explored by the eminent Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

The close bond between the Albanian man and his friend, combined with the golden rule (with a slight adaptation), is also referenced in the first Albanian autobiography (1881-82). This is an autograph fair-copy manuscript written in Italian “My life in Albania” (“La mia vita in Albania”), found in the provincial library of the Capuchin order in the norther Italian town of Trento.

..., the following chapter comes as a welcome relief: entitled “Friendships in Albania”, it is both more positive and more autobiographical. Lazër Tusha gives a passionate description of the depth of loyalty that is to be found in Albanian friendship. ‘For his friend, an Albanian would drown himself, throw himself into the flames, fall from a high precipice, or condemn himself to perpetual imprisonment, to hunger, privations, the loss of all his property, and of his own life. And if the Albanians are wanting when it comes to obeying the other commandments of our Lord, I believe that they perfectly fulfil the one that says “*love your neighbour like yourself*” – given that, frequently, they love their neighbour *more* than they love themselves’. (Malcolm 2020: 269)

The depth of this loyalty is further illustrated in the proverb *Shqiptari për mik asht tretë e asht fikë* (*The Albanian is like a candle to a guest (burning oneself up)*). Moreover, the proverbs emphasize the importance of reciprocal trust in friendship and hospitality:

(22) *Njeri besnik, gjan shok e mik. A man of besa is a friend indeed.*

(23) *Pa besë s'kie kurrxha: as kie zot, as kie pushtet, as kie mik. No besa, no religion, no power, no friends/guests.*

(24) *Kush ka gjetë një mik bestar, ka gjetë një hazne. S/he who finds a friend of besa, finds a treasure.*

#### 5.4. *Besa is not to be taken for granted*

However, the existence of impure friendships is acknowledged, and despite the strength of the bonds of friendship and the sa-

credness of the guest, trust is not to be taken for granted. One should not trust indiscriminately, even if one is a trustworthy person or a person of *besa*. Consequently, Albanian proverbs frequently include warnings regarding trust:

(25) *Pernia më ruajtë nga miku i pabesë, pra nga armiku ruhem vetë. God save me from my besaless friend (a friend of no trust), for I can take good care of mine enemy!*

(26) *Besë jep, por besë mos ki! Give thy besa, but doubt other's besa!*

(27) *Besë s'ka e besë mba. (Besnik bëhu, por besë mos ki) Own your besa!*

(28) *Besnik banu e besë mos zen! Give besa, but keep your eyes wide open!*

(29) *Besnik behu, por besë mos ki! Give thy besa, but don't trust!*

(30) *Bestar duhet të jesh, por besë kollaj te mos zash. Own thy besa, but beware of others' besa!*

(31) *Jepe besën ku duhet e jo ku s'duhet! Give thy besa wherever needed!*

With the exception of the first proverb, all the other proverbs seem to be variants in structure or dialect use and they can most certainly be compared with the American proverb *Trust but verify* (Ronald Regan 1966, Mieder 2019: 224).

### 5.5. *Besa and Albanian(ism)*

(32) *Besa e shqiptarit është shqiptaria. (The faith/religion of the Albanians is Albanianism).*

Is *besa* the true Albanian religion? (cf. Godart 1922: 75)

Albanianism can be interpreted in various ways. When combined with *besa* in proverbs, the term is used to denote the prioritization of national and ethnic identity over religious differences, serving as a concept of unity, solidarity among Albanians. It reflects a strong sense of a unique and resilient Albanian identity and pride in it, and has contributed to cultural cohesion in the face of powerful divisive forces in the history of Albanian people so that the proverb becomes a symbol of Albanian culture.

In their historical study, Fischer and Schmitt employ the term Albanianism in Part Two, Chapter 5 as “*Arnavutluk* to Albania: The Triumph of Albanianism 1912-1924” with reference to the state and nation-building in Albania (2022: 143-186).

Without wishing to engage with broad issues of history or etymology, it is necessary to add a note to supply some background on the designation *Arnavutluk* and the Albanian self-designation *Shqiptari*.

*Arnavutluk* is a Turkish term (ethnonym) for the Albanians under Ottoman Rule. The Ottomans ruled over the southwestern Balkans between the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and the first Balkan war in 1912. Only a section of *Arnavutluk* was transformed into the modern Albanian state.

“Arnavutluk literally means an area full of Albanians or a region where the Albanian ethnic element is dominant among many other ethnic groups. The second advantage to the term Arnavutluk is that semantically it is not related to any kind of institutionalized power. In terms of space and delimitations, its vagueness precisely fits the premodern, sociocultural patterns of open and overlapping spaces” (Fischer and Schmitt 2022: 7)

The native endonym and ethnonym *shqiptar* attested from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward appears in written sources around 1700, reflecting the socio-political, cultural, economic and religious context that Albanians experienced during the Ottoman era. Before this era, the Albanian term Arbër was used (likely a variant of the word Albanian).

“Muslim and also Christian Albanians identified with a new self-designation. The term *Shqiptar* (derived from the verb *shqiptoj*, to express oneself in an understandable way) described an Albanian in the context of the Ottoman empire and its predominant Islamic culture; it referred to someone belonging to a *linguistic community* whose majority had been Islamized” (Fischer and Schmitt 2022: 90).

The Albanologist Maximilian Lambertz (1882- 1963) preferred a connection of *shqip* (“Albanian language”), *shqiptar* (“Alba-

nian”) and *Shqipëria* (“Albania”) with Alb. *shqipe* or *shqiponjë* (“eagle”), which is the ethnic and national symbol of Albanians, used in that capacity in the earliest records.

The background knowledge of these designations is instrumental in understanding the content and power of the proverb *The faith/religion of the Albanians is Albanianism* as a pledge of allegiance. This proverb emerged from a poem written by Pas-hko Vasa around 1878 and 1880 and shows that national and ethnic identity supersedes religious identity. The stirring call to national awakening urging all Albanians to overcome their religious and cultural differences and defend their homeland permeates the poem as translated by Elsie.

*Oh Albania, poor Albania  
Awaken, Albania, wake from your slumber,  
Let us all, as brothers, swear a common oath  
and not look to church or mosque,  
The faith of the Albanian is Albanianism!*

... (O moj Shqypni, ca. 1878 translated by Robert Elsie)<sup>5</sup>

“This phrase would later become famous since it expressed the suprarreligious identity model of nationalist activists and of the modern Albanian state” (Fischer and Schmitt, 2022: 137).

In his essay “Crypto-Christianity and religious Amphibianism in the Ottoman Balkans. The case of Kosovo” (which the author holds true for (other) parts of Albanian lands, as well), Sir Noel Malcolm distinguishes three factors regarding religion/s:

1. The social coexistence of Christians and Muslims that matters here is not the co-presence of the two faiths in towns or country areas, but the close coexistence of people living in such social intimacy that they could not avoid experiencing, and even in some way sharing the ritual acts or religious observances of each other's faith. The strongest form this took was the coexistence of religions within a single family

<sup>5</sup> Elsie, Robert [http://www.albanianliterature.net/authors/classical/vasa/vasa\\_poetry.html](http://www.albanianliterature.net/authors/classical/vasa/vasa_poetry.html), retrieved on 1 May 2025

2. Religious syncretism – at the level of folk-religion, many practices were shared between Muslims and Christians, for a range of purposes including divinatory, medical and apotropaic.
3. Theological equivalentism – that both Islam and Christianity were equally valid ways to salvation. (See Malcolm 2020: 55-67)

On a similar tone, the British romantic writer Lord Byron would comment “No nation are so detested and dreaded by their neighbours as the Albanese; the Greeks hardly regard them as Christians, or the Turks as Moslems; and in fact, they are a mixture of both, and sometimes neither” (Byron 1818: Appendix to Canto the Second, p. 103; trans by Luarasi 1956, 2004: 223).

Be that as it may, the coexistence of religions within a single family is present even in modern Albania and, in fact, the inter-religious harmony is impressive. Suffice it to mention that Albanian official holidays include religious holidays of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Islam and the pagan feast of the Summer Day on 14 March.

“The presence of different religions in the life of the Albanian ethnicity has nourished throughout the centuries the richness of the typological and stylistic culture of Albania, its regional and national variation making it thus more expressive and diverse” (Jakllari 2018: 205). This cultural richness continues to impress visitors and tourists today.

Needless to say, this proverb is incorporated in all the dictionaries of Albanian language, is widely taught at school and widely used by Albanians. It can most certainly be considered as a proverb participating in nation-building (Granbom-Herranen 2018: 369-379) and serves to define Albanianism, so that *besa* and Albanianism become synonymous.

Furthermore, the spirit of unity embodied in this proverb recalls the old classical proverb and the famous American traditional motto *e pluribus unum* (Obama 2002-2009, Mieder 2010, 32; Mieder 2019: 57). (Albanians of different religions are still Albanians with a strong and unique identity relying on language, etc. rather than religion). This might be interpreted as evidence that Albania, like many European countries, is strongly secularized. Quite amusingly, through a playful language use, the Albanian intellectual Fatos Lubonja has coined the anti-proverb

*Skyscrapers are the symbols of our new religion* (Fischer and Schmitt 2022: xviii).

Other proverbs related to Albanian(ism) (Table 3) can be attributed to Albanian oral tradition, ballads and customary laws which are themed on the inestimable value of Albanian *besa*, the psychological intensity involved in keeping a promise as a marker of Albanian character and one’s honour (their supreme moral value as reflected in the ballad and Kadare’s literary work of Doruntina). The last three proverbs appear to be variants of the same underlying proverb.

Table 3. Besa and Albanian(ism) proverbs

Albanian proverbs	English translation
<i>Besë e shqiptarit si purtekë e arit.</i>	<i>Albanian besa is worth more than gold.</i>
<i>Shqiptari vdes dhe besën që ep, nuk e çart.</i>	<i>The Albanian might die, but he will never do away with besa.</i>
<i>Shqiptari kryet e pren, e besën s’e then.</i>	<i>For the Albanian it is better off with one’s head than off with the troth.</i>
<i>Shqiptari, kur thotë “besën ta jap”, s’i bjen prapë.</i>	<i>The Albanian shall never break his promise.</i>

In response to the question “Is Albanian man’s *besa* his bond?” as posed in the title, the proverbs indicate that an Albanian man’s *besa* is the strongest and deepest bond, worth more than gold, his religion, his honour, identity, and hope.

“In their entirety, proverbs constitute an encyclopedia of the wisdom and philosophy of the people of a particular culture, their mindset and psychology, their artistic and esthetic consciousness. Proverbs constitute the basic code of their ethical and moral norms” (Panajoti and Xhagolli,1983:7).

While many *besa* proverbs can be perceived as quintessentially Albanian with strong ties to Albanian cultural and historical developments, researchers point that there is a broader European spirit within Albanian culture which is evident in the persistence of the cult of the homeland as opposed to religion, the use of shared symbols such as the Leonore motif which is found in the traditional culture of other European countries, and the fact that the basic ethical concepts of Albanian customary laws such



as friendship, family, honour, property, church, etc., have been widely applied by both Christian and Muslim communities in Albania and are compared to the canonical and customary laws of Medieval Europe (see Jakllari, 2018: 206-208).

## 6. Concluding remarks

A few concluding observations are warranted to summarize the rich content of *besa* proverbs and to highlight some broader aspects that emerge from this analysis.

*Besa* is a multi-dimensional construct and its impact is very powerful. Its paremiological dimension encompasses issues of character, family, ethnic and national identity, friendship, hospitality, and notions of “otherness” within the Albanian cultural context. The exploration of *besa* proverbs leads to themes found in myths and legends, customary laws back in time, history, literature, religion/s, museums and other aspects of Albanian culture. Notably, proverbs featuring *besa* consistently encode positive implications. In the wise sayings of *besa*, there is a devotion to values, virtue and compassion, patriotism, a reflection of the ethical and social relations in Albania and room for hope (*Ku është shpresa, atje është edhe besa. Where there is hope, there is besa*). Themes such as honour, trust, dignity, commitment, protection, fortitude, hospitality, bravery, identity, and loyalty are intricately woven into *besa* proverbs. Indeed, all these cannot be fathomed at all without knowledge of Albanian *besa* and *besa* proverbs.

Albania is changing dramatically. While *besa* most likely belongs to Albanian cultural heritage, its influence continues to shape Albanian attitudes towards hospitality and keeping one’s word. Although the formal concept might be fading, its resonance persists within the culture.

Bringing *besa* proverbs together in this article is intended to serve students, researchers and to propagate them to a wider readership. However, the multifaceted picture of *besa* proverbs presented in this article is not exhaustive, and many proverbs on *besa* remain unexplored. Moreover, while some proverbs may be highly familiar and frequently used, it should be emphasized that a more comprehensive study of *besa* proverbs would require a far more rigorous and extensive analysis.

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