
The Libraries of Kosovo: A Historical Overview

ADIL OLLURI

Translated by Donjeta Bekim Shatri

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the development of Kosovan libraries and literature between the years 1990 to 1999, one of the most difficult decades in the county's history. During this time, both Kosovo's libraries and its Albanian people suffered under the effects of extreme political unrest. In addition to analyzing this period of social turmoil, the paper provides a brief history of Kosovan libraries, the oppression of the Albanians during the 1998–1999 war in Kosovo, and an overview of the country's contemporary libraries and their vision for the future.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, Kosovo was severely affected by an oppressive Serbian dictatorial regime, led by Slobodan Milosevic. In 1999, the political coercion descended into an armed conflict between the Serbian police and military forces and armed Albanians defending their rights as Kosovars. People were executed by military forces directed by Milosevic, later known as "Balkan's Butcher." The conflict resulted in approximately 20,000 casualties, including women, children, and the elderly.

The Serbian dictatorship over the Kosovan Albanians directly hindered the precedence and development of Kosovan libraries and literature. Over the course of the decade, libraries throughout Kosovo were destroyed and thousands of books burned. Authorized destruction was not limited to the Kosovan library institutions; much of Kosovo's artistic relics and cultural monuments were also lost. The devastation in Kosovo parallels that of the violence perpetrated by the Nazis in World War II. But whereas the Nazis burned Albanian books in town squares, the Serbian militia sent them to the recycling plant in Lipjan (a township near Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo) (Bashota & Kokollari, 2010).

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THE HISTORY OF KOSOVO'S LIBRARIES

The development of libraries in Kosovo was not like the nearly continual and linear development of European libraries. The growth of libraries in Kosovo as academic institutions and cultural and social establishments was hindered primarily because of the country's political circumstances. From its origin, Kosovo was always subordinate to more powerful countries, resulting in an inability to maintain and develop its own cultural identity and social institutions. Initially, the Ottoman Empire occupied Kosovo and placed it under its sovereignty. The Turks prohibited the establishment of a Kosovan national library, the writing and publishing of books in the Albanian language, and the right to establish Albanian schools. All subject matter that was not Turkish, Islamic, or Arabic in nature was prohibited, the reading of it considered a "sin" and deviation from "the straight path." The banning of Albanian literature and educational facilities represented an attempt to Islamize and assimilate the Albanians, which consequently affected their autochthonic identity. This imperial oppression was also enforced in other Albanian-speaking areas. During the Ottoman conquest, some religious libraries were opened, containing primarily clerical books written in the Turkish and Arabic languages. While these libraries *did* include some manuscripts and poetry printed in the Albanian language, they used the Arabic alphabet, known as *alamido* writing (Hysa, 2000, p. 7).

The first library in Kosovo was established in 1513 during the Ottoman invasion; now named the Suzi Celebiu Library, it is located in Prizren, in southeast Kosovo near the border with Albania. Prizren is an important national and political center for the Albanians (Sadikaj, 2007). Historically, 1513 denotes the beginning of the library movement in Kosovo. The establishment of libraries with a limited stock of Albanian texts continued for five centuries, until 1912, when the Ottoman Empire eventually abandoned the areas inhabited by Albanians.

After its 500-year domination, in 1912, Albania finally gained independence and the first Albanian state was established. Meanwhile, other areas, such as Kosovo and Macedonia, passed from Ottoman to Slavic (Serbian, Montenegrin, and Macedonian) occupation. The eradication of Kosovan culture ("culturcide") continued during the invasion of the Serbian-Croat-Slovenian Kingdom, later known as the Yugoslavian Kingdom. At this time, the expansion of libraries and other cultural institutions in Kosovo came to a standstill; all development was halted, and what remained from the past was destroyed. After World War II, Kosovo became part of communist Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavian leader, Croatian Josip Broz Tito, was relatively liberal in his dealings with the Albanian people. Promoting the idea, based on his Marxist ideals, of "brotherhood and union" for Yugoslavia's constituent nations, he permitted the operation of Kosovan schools, cultural institutions, and libraries.

In 1944, the city of Prizren established the first library of national importance. Although it was not originally called the “national library,” it functioned as the premier library in Kosovo and is considered to be its first public library (Kokollari, 2010). The library was later moved to Pristina when the city became the capital of Kosovo, which was officially designated as the Autonomous Socialist Province of Kosovo. The new National Library of Kosovo (NLK) was established in 1982 and continues to operate in Pristina. Comparing the history of Kosovo with that of its libraries, it is apparent that as the political and ideological systems of the country have changed, so has the state of its libraries. Consequently, an overview of Kosovan libraries is also an overview of the country itself.

A DECADE OF CULTURCIDE

After the fall of communism in 1990, when the countries of Central and southeastern Europe claimed their independence, Kosovo continued to struggle against foreign domination. Initially, Tito had subdued Serbian nationalist oppression, but it steadily returned after his death in 1980 and spiraled out of control during the 1990s due to the wars that raged in the former Yugoslavia, including those in Bosnia and Croatia and eventually in Kosovo. Against this backdrop, in the last decade of the twentieth century, “the National Library of Kosovo, and many other public and private libraries in Kosovo faced a terrible fate” (Bashota, 2007, p. 21).

In 1990, the military-political regime of Milosevic oppressed the Kosovan Albanians by arbitrarily discarding Albanian workers from public services, including librarians, in an attempt to suppress and assimilate the people. Albanian professional, administrative, and technical workers within the NLK, like the rest of the public libraries in the country, were faced with unemployment: ninety-one librarians were fired and replaced by Serbians. The library was placed under Serbian administrative control, and on March 4, 1991, Slobodan Kostiq was appointed director, after the Albanian director, Mehmet Gerguri, lost his job (Kokollari, 2010). During the Serbian dictatorship in Kosovo, 22,000 books were added to the NLK, all in the Serbian language, while 125,981 library materials in Albanian were sent to the recycling plant in Lipjan (Frederiksen & Bakken, 2000, 2001). The political upheaval caused extensive damage to the NLK, as well as to other libraries and archives (Riedlmayer, 1999–2000).

The last decade of the twentieth century severely hindered the development of Kosovan libraries. During the political turmoil, thousands of people were killed by the Serbian military and over a million Kosovars abandoned their homes to seek shelter in Albania and Macedonia. Meanwhile, public libraries were burned throughout Drenas, Skenderaj, and Malisheva (small cities in central Kosovo). The culturcide finally ended on June 12, 1999, when, thanks to the help of the international community, Kosovo eventually gained freedom and disengaged from the Serbian

political plans of ethnic cleansing and forced assimilation. Immediately after the ceasefire, in order to help Kosovan libraries rebuild their collections, US publishers organized shipments of donated books (Patrick, 1999). An appeal for assistance to the international library community was made in 2008 by Besim Kokollari, a Kosovan librarian, who published a piece titled "Kosova Libraries: Where Practical Steps Are Needed" in the *ASIS&T Bulletin*. In spring 2011, donations were made by Canada (Atlantic International Library in Kosovo, 2011).

KOSOVAN LIBRARIES NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

The NLK is attempting to overcome its traumatic past. Traditionally, libraries have been considered the "memory of humankind," playing a vital role in preserving the past to foster the development of knowledge, thinking, and culture. As Umberto Eco once stated, "Throughout the centuries, libraries are one of the most important ways to keep collective wisdom" (qtd. in Kokona, 2007). The role of libraries, especially the NLK, is vital for safeguarding a nation's knowledge and history.

The NLK has been embracing Western library practices despite the fact that it does not have adequate financial support to sustain its progress. Similar to libraries in the West, the NLK is organized into departments (Bogdani, 2014), including the following:

- *Collection development*: gathers current resources and makes them available for use onsite
- *Electronic cataloging*: creates the electronic catalog with bibliographic records and maintains the institution's website
- *Special collections*: this is one of the most important departments in the NLK, responsible for preserving rare books, manuscripts, unique documents, maps, photographs, and so on
- *Bibliography*: maintains bibliographies and publishes collections with annotations and bibliographic information
- *Professional development*: responsible for the NLK's librarians' professional training and continuing education in using new technologies

Furthermore, the NLK has installed Ex Libris's Aleph 500, an advanced, integrated library system that enables the institution to create a catalog with bibliographic records, which users can consult online. Due to this program, the NLK's services have markedly improved, not least in terms of the free access to information now available via the internet.

The main challenge for the future of the NLK is the digitization of printed materials. During this process, the library plans to place online the national heritage of Kosovo, for easy access by Kosovars and foreigners alike. Due to the very large number of documents that must be processed and the time required, the NLK has established priorities in implementing the program, the basic criterion being the cultural or historical value of the

materials. So far, the most commonly digitized materials are rare books (49 percent digitized), photographs (44 percent), manuscripts (39 percent), monographs (35 percent), music scores (30 percent), newspapers (9 percent), and maps (1 percent) (“National Library of Kosovo,” 2014). Professional journals like *Biblioetra* are already accessible online. The library is also engaged in developing a portal that will include other digital libraries. Digitalization is not only a feature of the future of Albanian books but also serves users who need to access books from other libraries. Digitalization is the primary mission of Kosovan libraries in the near future.

THE KOSOVAN LIBRARY NETWORK

In accordance with Library Law no. 04/L-097 (Ligjinr. 04/L-097 për Bibliotekat), which was approved by the Republic of Kosovo Assembly on April 6, 2012, and promulgated by the decree (DL-015-2012) of the country’s president, Atifete Jahjaga, on April 26, 2012, libraries are now separated into public and private sectors. Kosovo’s public libraries are categorized as follows:

- The National Library of Kosovo
- Municipal libraries
- University libraries
- School libraries
- Special libraries

In addition to the NLK, there are thirty-seven municipal libraries, also known as city libraries. These libraries also have branches in villages and small towns. According to statistical data, Kosovo has 118 public libraries, both urban and rural. Moreover, the country has six public universities—University of Pristina, University of Prizren, University of Peja, University of Gjakova, University of Gjilan, and University of Mitrovica—each endowed with a large main library, with branches in their various faculties/schools of the university. School libraries are small public libraries for high school and elementary schools used by students and teachers. Additionally, there are separate libraries that operate within public research institutions (such as the Library of the Academy of Sciences of Kosovo, the Library of the Institute of Albanology–Pristina, and the Library of the Institute of History). Also, special libraries operate in various other institutions, such as the Association for the Blind, prisons, the armed forces, and political institutions. There are three “American Corners” of the US embassy in Kosovo: in Pristina, Prizren, and Mitrovica. Based on its activities and the services it provides, the American Corner Pristina is considered to be one of the best libraries in the Balkans. Kosovo also has a number of private libraries, which are located in private schools, universities, and organizations.

The Association of Librarians of Kosovo was founded on November 12, 1971, as a community of professionals who volunteer their time and

expertise to further the library profession and work toward protecting the rights of library employees by creating better working conditions. Kosovar librarians attend IFLA conferences, and some have participated in foreign exchange visits. In 2005, the library of Harvard College hosted information sessions for nine librarians from Kosovo who were spending a semester training in library science at Simmons College in Boston (“HCL Information Sessions for Kosovo Librarians,” 2006).

CONCLUSION

Kosovo has been making significant progress toward European integration (Grieger, 2013). Despite the political unrest in the country at the close of the twentieth century, Kosovan libraries are now able to focus on modernizing. Gradually, the libraries have been making progress in adopting and integrating current international practices. There is a will and readiness to succeed on the part of both Kosovo’s librarians and the country’s leaders. In spite of the years of political upheaval, Kosovo’s libraries are coming back to life. Such a restoration is like the ancient myth of the phoenix rising from the ashes. Kosovan libraries are the phoenix of our era.

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Adil Olluri is a fiction writer and literary critic. He has published three books: *Many Roads and a Fall* (a collection of short stories, 2013); *The Albanian Postmodern Novel* (2011); and *The Postmodern Trilogy* (2011). He is one of the founders of the Writers Club of Kosovo and the editor of *Jeta e Re*, the oldest literary journal in Kosova. He won the 2011 National Literary Award for best book in the field of literary criticism from the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports for *The Albanian Postmodern Novel*. He worked in the National Library of Kosovo from 2007 until 2014 and currently works at Kosova's Institute of Albanology.

Donjeta Bekim Shatri is a third-year student of English Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo. She has been a translator for the Council for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedom as part of an internship.