Research Article

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ALBANIAN FOLKTALES IN THE ATU SYSTEM, WITH SLOVENIAN PARALLELS

Literary Studies

Keywords: Albanian folktales, Slovenian folktales, ATU classification, comparative folklore, tale types, Robert Elsie, Monika Kropej Telban.

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Abstract

This study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches within a comparative framework to analyse Albanian folktales in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) classification system alongside the Slovenian tradition. The quantitative tier surveys Uther's (2011) The Types of International Folktales, identifying 282 Albanian tale types across six of the seven major categories, dominated by Anecdotes and Jokes (55.9%), with Formula Tales entirely absent. The qualitative tier analyses Robert Elsie's (2001) corpus of thirty-two narratives, assigning five folktales to international types (ATU 510, 514, 550, 561, 425C), tracing motif correspondences from Strabo and Apuleius through the One Thousand and One Nights to Perrault and Grimm, and confirming that the ten legends lie beyond the ATU framework. The comparative tier juxtaposes the Albanian findings with Monika Kropej Telban's type indexes of Slovenian folktales (2015, 2025a, 2025b). Three conclusions emerge: the two traditions share the pan-European narrative inheritance while preserving irreducibly local mythological systems (Bukura e Dheut, Kulshedra, Zana; povodni mož, Wild Man, vile); typological identity does not entail mythological identity; and the contradiction between the catalogue's silence on Albanian Formula Tales and the presence of a cumulative tale in Elsie's corpus demonstrates that distributional figures measure the history of documentation as much as the tradition itself. The asymmetry between the systematically indexed Slovenian repertoire and the dispersedly documented Albanian one issues a programmatic call for a national Albanian type index.

INTRODUCTION

Oral literature preserves archaic narrative elements that written traditions often lose over time. The folktale traditions of Albania and Slovenia offer particularly rich material for comparative investigation: both preserve ancient mythological substrata while exhibiting distinct local characteristics shaped by divergent historical contexts – Ottoman and Mediterranean in the Albanian case (Elsie, 2001, p. 5), Central European and Catholic in the Slovenian (Kropej Telban, 2015). The present study builds on the work of three scholars whose contributions make such a comparison possible: Hans-Jörg Uther, Robert Elsie, and Monika Kropej Telban.

Uther's The Types of International Folktales (2004, 2011) represents the culmination of the classification system first developed by Antti Aarne (1910) and revised by Stith Thompson (1961). The Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) system organises traditional narratives into seven major categories – from Animal Tales (ATU 1–299) to Formula Tales (ATU 2000–2399) — and documents the geographic distribution of each type through regional and national catalogues. It provides the standardised framework within which both Albanian and Slovenian material can be located, while its recognised limits regarding heroic epics and historical legends define the boundaries of the present analysis.

Elsie (1950–2017), the Canadian-born Albanologist who published some sixty books on Albanian language, literature, and culture, produced in Albanian Folktales and Legends (2001) the most accessible English-language corpus of Albanian oral prose: twenty-two folktales and ten legends, translated with philological fidelity from the collections of Hahn (1864), Mitko (1878), Dozon (1881), Pedersen (1895), and the post-war Albanian institutes. His scholarly apparatus – tracing the Bukura e Dheut, the Kulshedra, and the Zana across Greek, Italian, Aromanian, Turkish, and Kurdish traditions – transforms the collection into a comparative resource. Yet no national Albanian type index exists; Albanian variants are documented only dispersedly within Uther's catalogue.

Slovenian folkloristics, by contrast, possesses precisely such an infrastructure. Kropej Telban's Type Index of Slovenian Folktales – animal tales and fables (2015) and tales of magic in two volumes covering ATU 300–499 and ATU 500–745 (2025a, 2025b), the first of which received the ARIS Award for Excellence in Science in 2025 — systematises the Slovenian repertoire according to the international system and renders it directly comparable. This asymmetry between a dispersedly documented Albanian tradition and a systematically indexed Slovenian one motivates the design of the present study, which combines a quantitative survey with a qualitative corpus analysis within a comparative framework.

Three research questions guide the investigation: (a) What is the total number and distribution of Albanian folktale types documented in Uther's (2011) catalogue? (b) Which ATU types and international parallels are represented in Elsie's (2001) corpus, and to what extent do uniquely Albanian mythological figures resist typological classification? (c) What correspondences and divergences emerge when the Albanian material is compared with Kropej Telban's Slovenian type indexes?

METHODS

Design

The study employs a three-tier comparative design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The first tier consists of a quantitative survey of Albanian tale types documented in the international catalogue; the second, a qualitative ATU and motif analysis of a representative Albanian corpus; the third, a cross-cultural comparison with the Slovenian type indexes.

Sources

Three primary sources correspond to the three tiers. For the quantitative survey, the source was Uther's (2011) The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Parts I and II, specifically the "Literature/Variants" sections within each type entry (ATU 1–2399), where the geographic distribution of tale types is documented through regional and national catalogues. For the qualitative analysis, the corpus was Elsie's (2001) Albanian Folktales and

Legends (second amended edition), comprising thirty-two narratives: twenty-two folktales and ten legends, drawn from the collections of Mitko (1878), Dozon (1881), Jarnik (1883), Pedersen (1895), Meyer (1896–1897), Frashëri (1936), and post-war Albanian publications, with the legends drawn primarily from Kuteli (1987). For the comparative tier, the sources were Kropej Telban's Type Index of Slovenian Folktales: animal tales and fables (2015) and tales of magic, ATU 300–745 (2025a, 2025b).

Procedure

Tier 1: Quantitative survey. A systematic review of all ATU type entries was conducted to identify entries with documented Albanian variants. An entry was included if it explicitly mentioned Albanian tradition in the variants section or cited a published collection documenting narratives from Albanian territory (e.g. Hahn, 1864; Dozon, 1881; Lambertz, 1922; Camaj & Schier-Oberdorffer, 1974; and Mazon's, 1936, documentation of Slavic-language narratives from southern Albania). Each identified type was classified according to Uther's seven categories, and frequency distributions were calculated. The most frequently cited sources were identified through analysis of the bibliographic citations.

Tier 2: Corpus analysis. Each of the thirty-two narratives in Elsie's (2001) collection was cross-referenced with Uther (2011) to identify direct ATU assignments. Narratives lacking a direct assignment were analysed through motif-based comparison, drawing on Elsie's scholarly annotations (2001, pp. 107–112) and parallels in classical sources (Apuleius, Strabo), oriental collections (One Thousand and One Nights), and European tale collections (Basile, Perrault, Grimm). The ten legends were categorised thematically (heroic, historical, etiological) rather than typologically, given the recognised limits of the ATU system for epic and historical narratives.

Tier 3: Comparison. The Albanian findings from both tiers were compared with the Slovenian material as systematized by Kropej Telban (2015, 2025a, 2025b), focusing on three parameters: distribution across ATU categories, supernatural figures and their functions, and the treatment of genres at the margins of the ATU system.

RESULTS

Tier 1: Distribution of Albanian Tale Types in Uther's Catalogue

A total of 282 distinct ATU types were identified as having documented Albanian variants, spanning six of the seven major categories. Formula Tales (ATU 2000–2399) are entirely absent from the documented corpus. Table 1 presents the distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of Albanian Folktale Types by ATU Category (Uther, 2011)

Category	ATU Range	Documented Types	% of Total
Animal Tales	1–299	15	5.3
Tales of Magic	300–749	46	16.4
Religious Tales	750–849	7	2.5
Realistic Tales	850–999	29	10.3
Tales of the Stupid Ogre	1000–1199	28	10.0
Anecdotes and Jokes	1200–1999	157	55.9
Formula Tales	2000–2399	0	0.0
Total		**282**	**100**

Anecdotes and jokes dominate the corpus, comprising more than half of all documented types. The most frequently documented individual types are ATU 301 (The Three Stolen Princesses, 14 citations), ATU 425B (Son of the Witch, 12), ATU 332 (Godfather Death, 11), and ATU 1164 (The Devil and the Evil Woman, 11). The most frequently cited source for Albanian variants is Camaj and Schier-Oberdorffer (1974), which appears in 79 separate entries, followed by Mazon (1936) with 34 and Lambertz (1922) with 18.

Tier 2: ATU Types in Elsie's Corpus

Of the twenty-two folktales in Elsie's (2001) collection, five (22.7%) received direct ATU classification (Table 2). A further group shows clear motif correspondences without direct assignment – notably ATU 707 (The Three Golden Children) for "The Youth and the Maiden with Stars on Their Foreheads", ATU 425 (The Search for the Lost Husband) for "The Snake and the King's Daughter", and ATU 560 (The Magic Ring) for "The Foolish Youth and the Ring". All ten legends fall outside the ATU framework: five belong to the heroic Mujo and Halil cycle, two are single-hero legends, two are historical (Scanderbeg; Shega and Vllastar), and one is etiological (Rozafat Castle, sharing the pan-Balkan walled-woman motif of the foundation sacrifice).

Table 2. ATU-Classified Folktales in Elsie's (2001) Collection

ATU	Title	Tale Type	International Parallels	Albanian Distinctiveness
510	*The shoes*	Cinderella	Perrault (1697); Grimm (1812); Rhodopis (Strabo)	Father–daughter marriage taboo; inverted shoe test
514	*The girl who became a boy*	The Shift of Sex	Indo-European warrior-maiden tradition	Transformation via Kulshedra curse
550	*The scurfhead*	Quest for the Golden Bird	Argonauts; Orpheus	Three Earthly Beauties; eagle journey
561	*The boy and the Earthly Beauty*	Aladdin	1001 Nights; Andersen	Bukura e Dheut as underworld figure
425C	*The king's daughter and the skull*	Beauty and the Beast	Apuleius; Basile; Beaumont	Skull as enchanted husband

Tier 3: Albanian–Slovenian Comparison

Table 3 summarizes the comparison across the three parameters defined in Methods.

Table 3. Comparative Overview: Albanian and Slovenian Folktale Traditions

Parameter	Albanian tradition	Slovenian tradition
Documentation	Dispersed in Uther (2011); no national index	National type index (Kropej Telban, 2015, 2025a, 2025b)
Dominant documented category	Anecdotes and Jokes (55.9%)	Systematically indexed: animal tales (ATU 1–299); tales of magic (ATU 300–745)
Supernatural adversaries	Kulshedra (seven-headed female dragon); Moor (Arap)	Wild Man (cf. ATU 312); water spirit (povodni mož)
Supernatural female figures	Bukura e Dheut; Zana, Ora (pre-Roman, cf. Diana)	Fairies (vile); Ajdovska deklica
Religious narrative	Under-documented (2.5%); Ottoman-Islamic setting	Prominent religious Schwank legends (e.g., ATU 753)
Genres beyond ATU	Heroic epic cycle (Kângë Kreshnikësh); Scanderbeg legends	Legends (povedke) indexed separately from tale types

A structural contradiction between the two tiers constitutes a finding in itself: whereas Uther (2011) documents no Albanian Formula Tales, Elsie's corpus contains one cumulative tale, Half Rooster, with documented French, Italian, Flemish, and Spanish parallels (Elsie, 2001, p. 109), indicating that the absence in Table 1 reflects incomplete cataloguing rather than absence in the tradition.

DISCUSSION

The Predominance of Anecdotes and Jokes and the Question of Collection Bias

The dominance of Anecdotes and Jokes (55.9%) in the documented Albanian corpus invites two complementary explanations. First, anecdotal narratives have a high survival rate in oral tradition owing to their brevity, memorability, and adaptability to performance contexts (Röhrich, 1991). Second, the figure likely reflects collection bias: early collectors, in Albania as elsewhere in Europe, may have favoured shorter, easily transcribed narratives over longer magic tales (Uther, 2011, p. 10). The Slovenian comparison sharpens this point: where a national index systematically covers all categories (Kropej Telban, 2015, 2025a, 2025b), the distribution of a tradition can be assessed on its own terms; where documentation depends on a handful of foreign-language collections, as in the Albanian case, the distribution measures the history of collecting as much as the tradition itself. Reliance on Camaj and Schier-Oberdorffer (1974) for 79 of 282 entries makes this dependence explicit.

Cultural Stratigraphy

The qualitative tier confirms Elsie's (2001, p. 5) characterisation of Albanian oral literature as a palimpsest of three strata. The ancient/classical stratum appears in The shoes (ATU 510), rooted in the Greco-Egyptian Rhodopis tradition (Strabo, Geography 17.1.33), and in The king's daughter and the skull (ATU 425C), mapping onto Apuleius's Cupid and Psyche; the Kulshedra itself is etymologically related to the Greek khersydros (Elsie, 2001, p. 107). The Ottoman/oriental stratum is pronounced in The boy and the Earthly Beauty (ATU 561, the Aladdin type) and in the pashas,

dervishes, and Janissaries populating both folktales and legends. The European stratum appears in the pan-European types shared with the Grimm and Perrault traditions and in the cumulative Half Rooster. Slovenian tradition exhibits a different layering: pre-Christian Slavic mythological elements within a Central European Catholic frame, visible in religious Schwank legends such as ATU 753, Christ and the Smith, with its aetiological ending (Uther, 2011).

Mythological Figures and the Limits of Typology

The comparison of supernatural figures reveals both functional equivalence and irreducible specificity. The Kulshedra and the Slovenian povodni mož both guard waters and threaten communities, yet each is embedded in a distinct cosmology that the ATU system, focused on narrative structure rather than belief, cannot capture. The Bukura e Dheut – most likely a taboo name for an ancient underworld deity (Elsie, 2001, p. 107) — has no direct Slovenian counterpart; the Zana, etymologically related to Diana and derived from pre-Roman Illyrian religion (Elsie, 2001, p. 110), parallels the Slovenian vile functionally but not genetically. These figures show that typological identity (a shared ATU number) does not entail mythological identity.

Genres Beyond the System

Both traditions maintain genres that the ATU framework, by design, does not catalogue: the Albanian Kângë Kreshnikësh heroic cycle and Scanderbeg legends, and the Slovenian povedke. This is not a failure of the system but a boundary of its epistemology – it catalogues Märchen, not Sage. The finding that Uther (2011) documents no Albanian Formula Tales while Elsie's corpus contains a cumulative tale confirms, from the opposite direction, that absence from the catalogue is evidence of documentation gaps, not of the tradition's poverty. The Albanian case thus argues for what Slovenian folkloristics already possesses: a national type index.

Limitations

This study relies on one English-language corpus for the qualitative tier; the extensive Albanian-language collections in Tirana and Prishtina lie outside its scope, and dialectal nuances (Gheg, Tosk) are lost in translation. The quantitative figures depend on Uther's (2011) documentation, which the author of the catalogue himself acknowledges as incomplete for many regions (Uther, 2011, p. 11).

CONCLUSIONS

This study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches within a comparative framework to analyse Albanian folktales in the ATU system alongside the Slovenian tradition. The quantitative survey identified 282 Albanian tale types documented in Uther (2011), distributed across six of the seven major categories and dominated by Anecdotes and Jokes (55.9%), with Formula Tales entirely absent. The qualitative analysis of Elsie's (2001) corpus assigned five folktales directly to international types (ATU 510, 514, 550, 561, 425C), demonstrated motif

correspondences from Strabo and Apuleius through the One Thousand and One Nights to Perrault and Grimm, and confirmed that the ten legends – the Mujo and Halil cycle, the Scanderbeg tradition, Rozafat Castle – lie beyond the boundaries of the ATU framework.

The comparison with Kropej Telban's (2015, 2025a, 2025b) Slovenian type indexes yielded the study's central conclusions. First, the two traditions share the Indo-European and pan-European narrative inheritance while preserving irreducibly local mythological systems: the Bukura e Dheut, Kulshedra and Zana on the Albanian side; the povodni mož, Wild Man and vile on the Slovenian. Second, typological identity does not entail mythological identity – a shared ATU number catalogues narrative structure, not cosmology. Third, the contradiction between the catalogue's silence on Albanian Formula Tales and the presence of a cumulative tale in Elsie's corpus demonstrates that distributional figures measure the history of documentation as much as the tradition itself. The asymmetry between the systematically indexed Slovenian repertoire and the dispersedly documented Albanian one thus issues a programme for future work: Albanian folkloristics needs a national type index on the model of Kropej Telban's, integrating the collections of Tirana and Prishtina into international comparability. Future research should also examine transmission pathways across the Balkan region, where Greek, South Slavic, Aromanian and Albanian traditions have exchanged narrative material for centuries.

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