

**Biblical-philosophical Scenery of Kole Idromeni in “Two Paths of Life”**



**Cultural Studies**

**Keywords:** Analysis, iconographic reading, aesthetics, philosophical message, comparison.

**Prof. PhD. Oltsen Gripshi**

1. Prof. of Art History, Colors and Aesthetics Theory, Official Arts Department at the American College “Woodrow Wilson” of Tirana
2. Scientific Researcher at the Centre Albanologic Studies, in Tirana
3. Member of the Institute "Alb-Shkenca", in Tirana

**Abstract**

**Kole Idromeno (1860-1939)**

Was a high-spirited and many-sided artist. Idromeno was born in the cradle of cultural-spiritual and Albanian contemporary civilization, in Shkodra. He had his first steps as an artist in the studio of the famous Italian photographer, Pietro Marubi, in Shkodra. After finishing the university in the Academy of the Fine Arts in Venecia, it’s the point when he succeeded as an artist. When he came back in his country, he didn’t find it easy because he was interned by the Turkish Authorities for a year (1897-1898). Idromeno was conspicuous as an architect, painter, musician and photographer. In 1912 for the first time in Albania he brought a camera to shoot cinematographic films.

**Useful values:** The artist from Shkodra was the first walker of a new age in painting all over Albania. He achieved a lot of paintings with a new style and subject borrowed from Albanian life and tradition such as:

“The garden of a house in Shkodra”, “Our sister”, “Cliff of Ulqin”, “Wedding in Shkodra”, “Father Shtjefen Gjecovi”, and wrote his name in aeternum in golden letters as the father of Albanian Renaissance painting.

**The purpose of research:** In my esthetic- philosophical focus of a many-sided analysis, there’s the most impressive tableau of the painting “Two paths of life”, which belongs to the Renaissance period. It was the first announcer in that dark horizon due to the black shadow of 500-hundred Turkish invasion. It also contained critical elements and spirit and pointed out extraordinary historic-political, cultural-ethnographic and esthetic- psychological values at the end of XIX century in Albania. The picture that Kole Idromeno created through this fabulous work of art as a Iudicium, involves the Albanian people over years, where the crossroads between goodness and wickedness, existing and non-existing makes the message of victory of a native background be on the top of obelisk, deriving from the history of Pellazg, Illir and Albanian people nowadays.

**The method of research:** Another description of the events, which belonged to the period that this masterpiece was created, is also the book “Souvenirs della haute Albanie”, published in 1901 in Paris by the French Consul Auguste Degrand, who paraphrases in the chapter dedicated to religion: The famous painting of Kole Idromeno “Two paths of life” has been helpful to the priests to do their job during the religious ceremony among peasants, who used to live in very difficult conditions: in poverty, in age-long isolation, their orient customs and difficulties that Franciscan priests faced, in order to make them follow the right path of Christian moral values<sup>29</sup>.

**Introduction**

“Two paths of life” or Heaven and Hell is a masterpiece of the most various personality of Albanian obelisk Kole Idromeno. This topic touches the life of Albanian people during the Turkish invasion for 500 years. If you take this masterpiece, which belongs to the period of Albanian Renaissance, creates an emotional state inside you and impales deep in your heart. Idromeno uses a dual language which is psycho-philosophical and an anthropologic-cultural pictorial art. Through the painting, the author describes his feelings which are really meaningful to the historical events in Albania at that time, when he had a strong dissatisfaction towards social-political degradation. Catholic church had the same feelings and was completely against the phenomenon of social immorality which was widely spread in Albania.

Kole Idromeno, through this painting, expressed his desire for a healthy civilization and getting away from the Turkish habits or better say getting rid of the laziness and ignorance which had seized the Albanian culture at the end of XIX century. Thus, this masterpiece becomes critical toward the reality mentioned above, involving the whole country. An essential part is also the outstanding costumes worn by men, women and children with a wide range of colors, naturally shown in the dual view of “Two paths of life”.

<sup>29</sup> Auguste Degrand, “Souvenirs de la haute Albanie”, Valter Edit., Paris, 1901, f. 276.



Kolë Idromeno, *Two Paths of Life*, oil colors on canvas, 1893, The Historical Museum of Shkodra

The most distinguishable ones are those which belong to the North like: Zadrima, Dikagjin, Kelmedi and Shkodra without leaving apart the costumes of Middle and South Albania. By mixing up the muslim and catholic clothes, it gave a magical message showing the two religions<sup>30</sup> living perfectly together.

Kole Idromeno was an architect, painter, photographer, musician, composer, screenwriter and the only example that could produce such a wonderful work of art. He has cultivated all his skills in this painting like: the study of the anatomy of human body, the various Albanian portrait and ethnography, calm natures and landscapes. Due to this fact he was designated as Albanian Leonardo Da Vinci. Idromeno achieved successfully his works of art such as: “The garden of a house in Shkodra”, “Our sister”, “Cliff of Ulqin”, “Wedding in Shkodra”, “Father Shtjefen Gjecovi”<sup>31</sup> which contain ethnographic, anthropologic, religious, psychological and panoramic values which point out a dark past of Albanian society at the end of XIX century.

<sup>30</sup> Besi Bekteshi, “Dy Rugët” e Kol Idromenos, pse kryevepra u la në harresë”, Rivista Ëndrrat Shqiptare, Tiranë, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Ermir Hoxha, “Kolë Idromeno”, Rivista Muza, Durrës, 2011, f. 7 - 8.

“Two paths of life” is a work of genius, where the author describes his spiritual state which is in a terrible mood for the destiny of his country, a message that has been conveyed with a lot of difficulties throughout the time.

This masterpiece also used a new and unknown language in Albanian art up to that time, an art which belonged to the ordinary and byzantine style. Idromeno was the first to build a new art with wide vision. This painting resembles the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, where Hell and Heaven melt in the symbiosis of life significance or the painting “The big tower of Babelit” by Pieter Bruegel that involves you to be part of psychological-fiction universe, where the concept Humanitas is really meaningful.

The syntax of the language used in “Two paths of life” is perfect. In order to understand the psycho-philosophical Idromeno’s ideas, one has to observe the in hominis poenam and on a surface of 200 per 175cm to achieve the best virtues of Albanian people like two different religions living together. This is evidenced by mixing up naturally the national different costumes. Those of muslim religion that cover the whole body and catholic ones that let some parts of the human body uncovered. According to the paintings point of view, idem omnium mandatum is figured out in a direct way, where the poetic soul of Pashko Vasa in “Albanian religion is Albania itself” tries to find peace in the nest between two worlds, Heaven and Hell.

An important feature in this masterpiece is the spectacular scenery shaped vertically and makes it meaningful for the picture of Albanian Renaissance<sup>32</sup>. To create this great art, Idromeno was inspired by his home town Shkodra, including the hill of Rozafa castle, where Heaven and Hell are decomposed throughout the art and recreated into a sole image as a spes renascitur in “Two paths of life”<sup>33</sup>. The landscape also appears like a Zigurat spiral straight to the sky, where the path beyond two worlds is created by using a real language and unreal one at the same time. The painting provides strong communicative elements such as: one of the most burning pictorial colors of Hell at the bottom part of the scenery and unexpectedly they rise up gently, cold and sparkling towards the upper part straight to Heaven, the Kingdom of God, where peace dominates all around Jesus Christ tracks. Related to iconography, Idromeno sets up a wide nuntius, a vivant tableau of Albania at the end of XIX century. View framework is various where the calm nature, busy with trees animals, joins the bare nature, empty, cold, light everywhere and large cliffs that disappear gently in the mystic horizon.

The artist has created an encyclopedia of real images, spiritual states and original scenes taken from the reality, where any character doesn’t match for each other. Among this variety of characters, there are two scenes: “musicians | bacchanalians” worn in typical catholic costumes, that shows clearly they are from Shkodra, and “two devils” one is writing about what is happening, whereas the other is surprised due to the indifference of people about what is happening around them. One of the devils is standing still in the middle of two “bacchanalians” leaning against him, in this way showing the strong and unbeatable soul of Albanians, who are more evil than “the Devil” himself. Someone is taking raki, some are singing, another one is summoning those who are coming from Hell to join their group of sinners.

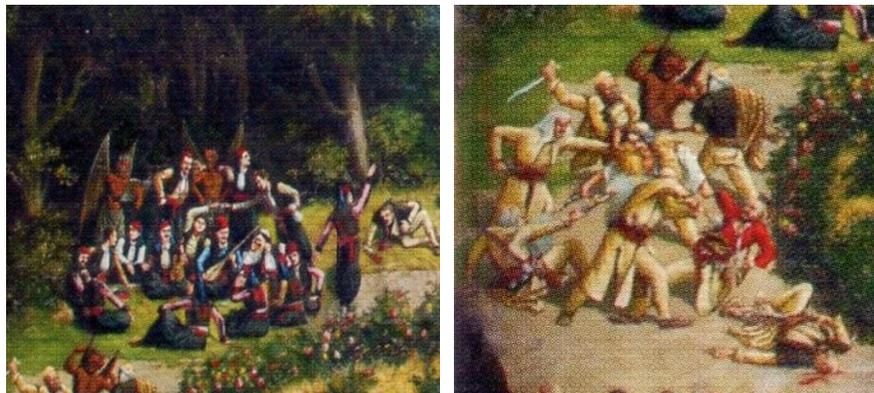
Idromeno conveys a critical message for the society, where “bacchanalians” crystallize a careless society, but only knows how to entertain and avoid the responsibilities and not getting out from the cliché of their lives. The description of “bacchanalians” consists of a tributum for Shkodra music. Soon after this musical scene, comes a well detailed scene, where villagers or peasants share gossips or fight each other. Through these actions is discovered another face of northern Albania culture, violent and aggressive people,

<sup>32</sup> Ferid Hudhri, “Albania through Art”, Donika Bardha Albanian Arts Foundation, Tiranë, 2007, f. 38, 39, 214 – 219.

<sup>33</sup> Ferid Hudhri, “Shqipëria nëpërmjet artistëve”, Shtëpia Botuese Onufri, Tiranë, 2003, f. 126 – 133.

whose lives consist of knives, rifles and “their bravery” to kill others. “God the first, Canon above all” is the slogan that would guide their spirit for a lifetime.

This scene is put purposely below that of "bacchanalians", because the triangular language created among the spectator, scenes and bacchanalians or violent people, makes you live through goodness and wickedness, beauty and ugliness, civilization and ignorance, life and death, when the earth starts to collapse and hides in the midst of heavy mist of illusion. The scene of murder involves nine characters, eight peasants and one Devil. Fear inside him is betrayed by his terrified face and at the same time becomes enthusiastic due to the slaughter between ordinary people....!! There is one murdered and the others are fighting strongly against each other. All are killing all. This is the high point message conveyed by Idromeno. At the end of XIX century, society in Albania had degraded and decayed thoroughly. Altruism and goodness were vanishing at that time where criminals and bandits of rural zones in Shkodra show the inherited virtues of Turkish backward culture of cruelty and murder. The costumes and armory of these characters are evidences of how peasants of Northern Albania<sup>34</sup> used to live. “Two paths of life” consist of six large scenes and twenty small scenes. The relation between the characters and scenery boosts a vivum theatrum, where the war between doubt and illusion disorients human sensibility and the right way to Heaven becomes meaningless. The way that leads to the large burning gate of Hell, is drawn like a wonderful and attractive and for this reason people go toward it. They avoid to go to the purgatory gate, which is smaller than the gigantic gate of Hell that is typical of Turkish architecture. Thus, the work of art “Two paths of life” has pictorial and esthetic values that convey a regenerative and free spirit of the invaded people by Turkish Empire. This feeling is exactly realized at the large gate of Hell and the figure of Albanian people freedom to return in their origin, is described by sending it straight to the paradise of Catholic world through the purgatory gate<sup>35</sup>. So we can say that “Two paths of life” is an indisputable et memoria of sacrifice, culture, traditions and darkness of Albanian society during the Turkish invasion<sup>36</sup>. This spectacular masterpiece codified the best values and the forbidden freedom of Albanian people through art and philosophic-fiction spirit of Kole Idromeno.<sup>37</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Ferid Hudhri, “Arti i Rilindjes shqiptare”, Shtëpia Botuese Onufri, Tiranë, 2000, f. 64 -72.

<sup>35</sup> A. Sadikaj, (Restaurimi i “Dy rrugët e jetës”), e piktorit Kolë Idromeno, Revista Monumentet, Tiranë, 1976, f. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Album “Rilindja Kombëtare Shqiptare”, Tiranë, 1962.

<sup>37</sup> H. Nallbani, (Tabloja “Dy rrugët e jetës” dhe restaurimi i saj), Gazeta Drita, Tiranë, 1980, f. 11.

## Conclusions

All I have described and achieved in my esthetic-philosophical analysis of the masterpiece of Albanian Renaissance “Two paths of life” of Kole Idromeno, is modest compared with the great message conveyed to the spectators. By using a historic-cultural and psycho-anthropological judgment, I have tried to reveal some of the most important elements such as: Religious subject that fits perfectly to the Albanian costumes, folklore and scenery, the universal values and message of the Albanian religions living together, that makes it even more special. At that time, this painting served as a strong light of hope up to the end of a dark tunnel of 500-Turkish invasion over Albanian people that saw another face and its European gene.

“Two paths of life” was a spiritual-psychological self-portrait of the artist from Shkodra, that gave life to the ideas, feelings and patriotic soul of Kole Idromeno. He also brought a humanism taste through visual poetry and magical pictorial art that bring all the characters to life in the Albanian drama theatre, where Idromeno gave the greatest importance to human being, virtues, and Albanian people sufferings. I compared and named this work of art as a self-portrait of Kole Idromeno because we cannot find himself pictured at any of his works. Idromeno was fond of this painting, since he paints himself with self-conscience among the group of bacchanalians, an ambiguous element, on one side as a part of cultural-folklore of Shkodra. On the other side self-painting within his paintings, which is a typical elements of artists and Italian Renaissance art, a period of time when Kole Idromeno was really keen on. Thus, in the long run of this analytic-iconographic path, the masterpiece “Two paths of life” describes the hill of Rozafa Castle as a simple and picturesque one in the Holy mountain, where Albanian people head towards the Heaven and prosperous path of God, where Albanian country would find peace and happiness.

## References

1. Auguste Degrand, “Souvenirs de la haute Albanie”, Valter Edit., Paris, 1901, f. 276.
2. Besi Bekteshi, “Dy Rrugët” e Kol Idromenos, pse kryevepra u la në harresë”, Rivista Ëndrrat Shqiptare, Tiranë, 2004.
3. Ermir Hoxha, “Kolë Idromeno”, Rivista Muza, Durrës, 2011, f. 7 - 8.
4. Ferid Hudhri, “Albania through Art”, Donika Bardha Albanian Arts Foundation, Tiranë, 2007, f. 38, 39, 214 – 219.
5. Ferid Hudhri, “Shqipëria nëpërmjet artistëve”, Shtëpia Botuese Onufri, Tiranë, 2003, f. 126 – 133.
6. Ferid Hudhri, “Arti i Rilindjes shqiptare”, Shtëpia Botuese Onufri, Tiranë, 2000, f. 64 -72.
7. Sadikaj, A. (Restaurimi i “Dy rrugët e jetës”), e piktorit Kolë Idromeno, Revista Monumentet, Tiranë, 1976, f. 42.
8. Album “Rilindja Kombëtare Shqiptare”, Tiranë, 1962.
9. H. Nallbani, (Tabloja “Dy rrugët e jetës” dhe restaurimi i saj), Gazeta Drita, Tiranë, 1980, f. 11.