



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PRIVATE
COMMERCIAL AND COMPETITION LAW
(IIPCC - AUSTRIA)

Research Article

© 2025 Ermira Alija and Brikena Smajli

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Centripetal and Centrifugal Dynamics in the Cultural Narrative of Shkodra

Dr. Ermira Alija

University of Shkodra, Albania

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4911-168X>

Dr. Brikena Smajli

University of Shkodra, Albania

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8180-4155>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejels-2025-0022>

Abstract

This article explores the “centripetal” and “centrifugal” dynamics in the literary history of Shkodra, drawing on Eqrem Çabej’s conception—and particularly his approach—to opposing tendencies in cultural and identity formation. By examining key figures and works from Barleti, the Dukagjinis, and the Bushatlis to contemporary authors such as Ridvan Dibra and Stefan Çapaliku, the study demonstrates how Shkodra has functioned simultaneously as a center for the gathering, elaboration, and dissemination of historical and literary narratives. The article argues that the processes of “centrifugalism” and “centripetalism” are defined not only by physical migration or demographic contraction but also by the circulation of ideas, literary returns, and the rearticulating of cultural identity. In this way, Shkodra’s literary history emerges as a network of interactions in which figures, institutions, and texts produce a “topography” of tensions and convergences between remaining and departing, between centralization and dispersal.

Keywords: Shkodra; centripetal and centrifugal dynamics; Eqrem Çabej; narrative space; cultural field; symbolic capital.

1. Introduction

Eqrem Çabej’s conceptualization of the terms centripetal and centrifugal (Çabej, 1994) interpreted by him as two opposing tendencies accompanying the course of human history offers a valuable analytical framework for examining cultural and historical processes. Building upon these concepts, the shifting resultant of the two forces defines in the concept of Çabej the existential configuration of Albanians in terms

of density, distance, and permanence. Although initially elaborated with reference to Albania and the Albanians, this approach may also serve as a productive lens for specific cultural spaces with a long historical trajectory, such as the city of Shkodra. In this study, the concepts of centripetality and centrifugality are employed as analytical tools, adapted to examine the cultural narrative of Shkodra.¹ Methodologically, centripetality is understood not merely as expansion but also as dissemination, whereas centrifugality is seen not simply as contraction, but rather as the converse of centripetality return, whether in terms of narrative, symbolism, authorship, or character. These concepts open a series of questions related to identity and cultural dynamics, which include: Where does expansion end and dissemination begin? Are there boundaries between them? Does anything remain unchanged when it is disseminated or transformed? In what ways can expansion and dissemination function as elements of identity affirmation?

Shkodra, an ancient city with Illyrian roots, provides a rich terrain for examining these dynamics. Historical and literary narratives, such as those concerning Queen Teuta, position Shkodra as the Illyrian capital and “centripetalize” it within a broad cultural and historical orbit. However, beyond these historical examples, this study focuses primarily on contemporary manifestations of these forces within the city’s cultural narrative, where tensions between departure and return, expansion and dissemination, are continuously reconfigured.

The aim of the study is to identify and interpret the ways in which these dynamics emerge and interact within Shkodra’s cultural narrative. In particular, the analysis seeks to illuminate how these conceptual forces contribute to understanding the processes of centralization and dissemination of the city’s cultural identity, primarily through literature.

2. Research Methods

This study relies on comparative reading and critical interpretation of authors and historical-literary texts that analyze Shkodra either as an object or as a narrative space. The analysis is based on written works that cover events spanning approximately 250 years. This temporal scope allows for observing the development of dynamics over a long-term period. The selection of texts aims to represent the tensions between these two tendencies both historically and contemporarily, through works and authors of symbolic importance to Shkodra. This approach permits a diachronic observation of cultural articulations as well as a synchronic examination of the different tendencies emerging in the context of two contemporary authors. In this way, the methodology establishes a dual framework—temporal and conceptual—that enables the identification of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in the figures, symbols, and narratives associated with Shkodra. Eqrem Çabej’s idea of two opposing

¹ Centripetalism refers to the tendency of narratives, institutions, or practices to consolidate, stabilize, and draw meaning toward a symbolic or normative center, while centrifugalism designates their dispersal, displacement, or reconfiguration across new spaces, contexts, or identities.

tendencies—centripetality and centrifugality—serves as the point of departure for this analysis. We conceptualize these tendencies as forces that, on the one hand, centralize and consolidate social and cultural energies, and on the other hand, disperse and reconfigure them into new forms. This vision provides a dynamic, rather than static, model for cultural development in a city such as Shkodra—historically a hub of commercial, religious, and intellectual exchanges. This concept has provided a suitable methodological foundation for understanding the alternation between physical, symbolic, and narrative centralizations and dispersions. Supporting this idea are two contemporary theoretical approaches that concretize this perspective in the field of culture and narrative practices:

Bourdieu (1992) conceptualizes literary production as a “field” in which different actors, writers, institutions, readers, and the media compete for symbolic capital. Applied to the case of Shkodra, this approach explains the city as the center of a cultural field that intermittently disperses energies and figures, and at other times centralizes them through emigration, diaspora, but also re-centripetalises them through literary returns. Thus, physical migration and the circulation of ideas or authors can be understood as forms of cultural capital that generate symbolic capital, where the tension between centralization and dispersion remains continuous.

De Certeau (1980) distinguishes between “place” and “space” and argues that space is produced through the practices, actions, and narratives that people construct upon a place. Within this framework, Shkodra is not merely a geographical location but becomes a “narrative space” through the authors who recount, document, or mythologize it. This approach allows us to view the relationship between centrifugality and centripetality as narrative processes: authors who leave the city but return to it in their texts reproduce Shkodra as a space or carry its name as an identity marker.

Thus, our methodology intertwines Çabej’s conceptualization with the theories of Bourdieu and de Certeau, enabling us to uncover Shkodra as a node where centralizing and dispersing tendencies intersect, not only demographically but also narratively. Çabej provides the terminology to conceptualize this dialectic, Bourdieu identifies the actors and capitals that represent it, and de Certeau elucidates the practical mechanisms through which the city’s space is produced as narrative. In this way, the theoretical framework offers an integrated approach for analyzing the actors, capitals, and narrative practices that shape Shkodra’s cultural identity.

3. Analysis

3.1. The Humanist Author Marin Barleti

The humanist author Marin Barleti stands as a symbol of the construction of a narrative space for Shkodra. He wrote *De obsidione Scodrensi* (The siege of Shkodra) in 1504, in which he performs a literary return to Shkodra, transforming the city from a concrete location into a symbolic space circulating throughout Europe. By shifting his attention and writing from the subject of Shkodra’s history to the *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi*, Barleti simultaneously enacts a centrifugal movement—

focusing on a unifying historical narrative—while also realizing a new centripetal dimension in historical processing. Skanderbeg, as the central figure of Barleti, transcends the city and influences the self-concept as Albanians (Alija, 2018) and assumes the proportions of a proto-national ideal by stating: “Love for the homeland surpasses all other loves” (Barleti, 2005).

Even Barleti’s physical departure to Italy (after Shkodra was conquered) represents a form of physical centrifugality; yet the return of the Albanian subject matter—the Siege of Shkodra and the *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi*—constitutes a centrifugal dynamic that, in turn, re-centralizes memory. Through these two works, he embedded Shkodra and Scanderbeg (as the heroic identity of a people in the struggle for freedom) in the European cultural memory: “I have resolved ... to make known the names of those who ... raised the dignity of Epirus” (Barleti, 2005).

3.2. Lekë Dukagjini III and Jahja Dukagjini

Approximately two and a half centuries later, two significant historical and literary figures, Lekë Dukagjini III and Jahja (Dukagin-zâde Yahyâ) Bey Dukagjini reveal further dimensions of the narrative dynamics concerning Shkodra.

Lekë Dukagjini III (15th century) is renowned as the figure who codified the social and administrative rules of the northern highlands of Albania, known as the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini (Dukagjini, 2015). The Kanun (often rendered “Constitution”) of Dukagjini is attributed to pre-existing traditions and practices but consolidated under the name and authority of Lekë Dukagjini. The codification of the rules in the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini, which is related to the third Lekë of Dukagjin (1459-1479) and was documentary by a city notary (Muhadri, 2021). This phenomenon may be interpreted as a centripetal mechanism: it establishes the legal structure that gathers, standardizes, and preserves social order, thereby strengthening the collective local identity. Through the Kanun, the element of tradition appears consolidated and protected against external disruptions. In this context, centralization is not merely territorial but also a cultural norm and shared authority—a centripetal force aimed at safeguarding the community’s endurance in the face of violence and change.

Another member of the Dukagjini lineage, Jahja Bey Dukagjini (often cited in foreign sources as Yahyâ Bey Dukagjini or Dukagin-zâde Yahyâ), a 16th-century poet and military figure, operated primarily within the Ottoman context and composed in Ottoman Turkish a corpus of poetry inscribed in the *divan* tradition (Sefercioğlu, 2016). He is regarded as a distinguished *divan* poet of the Ottoman Empire. Although he left Albania for reasons not precisely known, his work recenters his native land, to which he dedicates verses (Elsie, 1992). The centrifugal tendency of integration into an imperial cultural space is counterbalanced by a centripetal tendency through pride and nostalgia for his homeland, which becomes an identity marker amid the multiplicity of peoples in the vast Ottoman Empire. Foreign sources (e.g., studies on the Ottoman *divan* and the biographies of *divan* poets) describe Jahja as an example of this phenomenon.

The comparison between Lekë and Jahja reveals that strategies for managing tradition

and identity may assume different forms: the former (Lekë) aims at consolidation and normative re-establishment within territory and community, a predominantly centripetal approach; the latter (Jahja) manifests the dispersion of identity through the institutional channels of the empire and develops a form of cultural centrifugalism that reworks belonging in new contexts.

3.3 *Át Erasmo Balneo (1756–1788) and (Át Zef Pllumi)*

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Shkodër underwent a phase in which the local power of the Bushatli family asserted itself over Ottoman institutions. This period was marked by complex dynamics of administrative authority, by the relationships between the city and the highlands, and by inter-communications among religions and communities.

One of the key works that illuminates this period is *Át Zef Pllumi*. In it, he records what he remembers from reading the diary of *Át Erasmo Balneo* (1756–1788), which he had found in the Franciscan archives (Pllumi, 2004).

Balneo's diary-chronicle, as a primary historical source, has since disappeared, while Pllumi, almost two centuries later, writes down what he recalls from Balneo's text. Here, the document and the memory operate as centripetal instruments of an archive. Personal remembrance of local documentation becomes an authoritative source for historical testimony.

Balneo, an Italian priest on mission in the highland areas of Shkodër, under certain circumstances came into contact with Mehmet Pashë Plaku. Recognizing Balneo's knowledge, Mehmet Pasha brought him into his service. At that time, Mehmet Pasha was embarking upon his ambition to restore order in a city ravaged by the struggle for power between the Bushatli and the Çauşholli families, while the Ottoman administration proved unable to intervene. The priest, initially engaged as caretaker of Mehmet's son's health (Kara Mahmut Pasha), enabled Mehmet Pasha to forge an alliance with the Catholic highlanders so as to neutralize the Çauşholli family. This allowed Mehmet Pashë Plaku to consolidate his position and to employ it in the service of his own reformist ideas, to such an extent that even the Sultan conferred upon him the seal of the pashalik. Significant elements of the growth of his personality and authority as Pasha are reflected in the conversations and communications recorded by Father Balneo.

Mehmet Pasha Plaku transformed Shkodra in a historic and economically developed center, expanding its dimensions and significance. The diary-chronicle of the Italian priest, incorporated by Father Zef Pllumi, offers valuable information that moves from internal memory to collective memory. Within this network of figures, Mehmet Pasha and his son Kara Mahmut Pasha appear as centralizing actors of the city, while Balneo, the Italian Catholic priest, becomes the bridge that allows them to exploit new communicative spaces in the function of a complex centralization of Shkodra. At the same time, Balneo himself turns into a focal point of historical memory, whereas Father Zef Pllumi, by transcribing and publishing this material, becomes a narrative center and directs the account toward historical memory. Not by chance he notes:

“History can be written better starting from personal letters rather than official ones, because when a man writes an official letter, he tries to hide the truth or, at least, to change it” (Pllumi, 2004).

Thus, while the dissemination of memory maintains a centripetal tension—moving from the individual to the community and from one culture to another, this process is simultaneously centrifugal: it coordinates and reinforces the narratives that shape Shkodra’s historical and cultural identity.

3.4 *Ridvan Dibra and Stefan Çapaliku (Contemporary Novels)*

In contemporary literature of Shkodra, the tension between centralization and dispersion appears less as a historical-institutional issue and more as an existential and social drama. Both Ridvan Dibra (2016) and Stefan Çapaliku (2022) depict the city as a cultural space where memory, identity, loss, and return collide. We have selected these two novels as they exemplify centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in different forms.

Both authors employ a biographical mini-narrative: in the first case, it is autobiographical, connected to the self, while in the second, it is biographical but tied to the city. This renders Shkodra not merely a backdrop but an active “actor” in the narrative.

The emblematic locations that Dibra (2016) enumerates create a topography of memory, where toponyms function as “stations” of collective remembrance that resonate within personal identity. The landscape appears as a site-archive of memory that preserves the tension of opposites: remembrance (centripetalism) and forgetting as withdrawal, or amnesia (centrifugalism). Dibra employs the metaphor of snow and sleep as the loss of voice and memory across a white surface where everything is obscured or erased: “Do not surrender to the sleep upon snow, for any reason, for any cause... Rub your eyes as much as you can. Only thus does the snow, from an ally of the sleep of death, become its enemy...” (Dibra, 2016).

Çapaliku (2022) on the other hand, constructs Shkodra as a theatrical stage where individual and collective memory intertwine with nostalgic elements that verge on the grotesque. In both settings inhabited by the characters, the environment is far more than mere background. Just as Dibra’s emblematic locations, Shkodra itself becomes an actor that sometimes centralizes action (creating events, memories, myths) and at other times disperses it through gossip and grotesque figures.

Both novels express the centripetal–centrifugal dialectic under the conditions of dictatorship (one at its end, the other at its beginning). They transform this dialectic into an issue of individual and collective identity under authoritarian rule. Often, through gossip, narrative subjects were constructed as vividly as in the most imaginative works of literature worldwide.

4. Results

The comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite chronological differences and

distinct literary genealogies, several fundamental continuities re-emerge in the narrative constructions of Shkodër, such as:

- the recurring function of the city as a source of myth-making and as an identity-bearing center;
- the use of heroic or emblematic figures to articulate models of resistance and continuity;
- the persistent tension between centripetal forces (the consolidation of norms, institutions, memory) and centrifugal forces (mobility, exile, cultural re-adaptation).

The differences are equally instructive. Early authors (Barleti, Dukagjini) engage in a mode of narrative centralization, where historical figures serve as consolidating elements of identity. In later centuries (Balneo/Pllumi), Shkodër emerges as an institutional and documentary center, where the role of the document (diary, chronicle) becomes crucial for the construction of memory. In contemporary fiction (Dibra, Çapaliku), the focus shifts to the individual and to existential experience: centralization and dispersal are manifested in psychological and symbolic forms, through motifs such as amnesia, nostalgia, cultural homogenization, and moral conflict.

From the synthesis of these materials, the city of Shkodër emerges as a narrative center operating on three interwoven planes:

- As a historical-institutional center — local actors and institutions employ the city as a point of reference for political and normative organization (e.g., the Dukagjinis, the Bushatlis);
- As a mnemonic center — through historical texts and memoirs, the city is capitalized as a repository of collective memory; narratives ritualize and reproduce its legends;
- As an aesthetic-narrative center — in contemporary literature, the city of Shkodër produces scenes, characters, and motifs that dramatize conflicts and resist cultural homogenization, reformatting it instead.

The urban space of Shkodër is not simply a geographical backdrop; it is actively produced by narratives (historicizing, memorializing, fictionalizing) and by cultural practices (publishing, archiving, rituals, public performances). Consequently, cultural centralization is not merely a factual condition, but a performative effect of practices of writing, preservation, and interpretation.

Using Bourdieu's terminology, Shkodër may be read as a cultural field in which diverse actors (authors, religious institutions, noble families, publishers, archives) generate symbolic capital (historical legitimacy, moral authority, literary reputation). Thus, the writings of Barleti, Balneo, Pllumi, Çapaliku, and Dibra function as forms of symbolic capital that consolidate cultural centralization, while authors who lived in diaspora or wrote in other languages/contexts (e.g., Yahya within the Ottoman *divan* tradition) contribute to the dispersal and revalorization of this capital in new spaces. From de Certeau's perspective, the ways in which inhabitants, authors, and readers

“make space” through everyday practices (storytelling, rituals, reading, and the reworking of memory) demonstrate that Shkodër is produced as a narrative space: it is the effect of individual and collective practices that determine how the city is perceived and reproduced. In this sense, through those who hold the power to legitimize and confer symbolic weight, the city’s force is re-dimensioned by the forms through which it operates on the practical and narrative levels.

5. Conclusion

The interplay of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics emerges as a defining feature of Shkodra’s cultural narratives across centuries. From Barleti’s humanist historiography to Dukagjini’s normative codification, from Balneo’s documentary accounts mediated through Pllumi’s memory to the existential dramas of Dibra and Çapaliku, the city is consistently narrated as both a locus of consolidation and a site of dispersal.

What this study demonstrates is that Shkodra’s cultural identity has never been a static inheritance but rather a performative process shaped by textual, institutional, and narrative practices. Centripetal forces consolidate memory, authority, and collective identity, while centrifugal dynamics enable dispersion, reconfiguration, and transnational circulation of cultural capital. The originality of this approach lies in applying Çabej’s conceptual dichotomy expanded through Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field and de Certeau’s notion of spatial practices to trace how a city becomes a narrative center not simply by geography, but by the symbolic and performative work of its texts and authors.

Thus, the city of Shkodra is revealed not merely as an object of historical description but as an active agent in the production and reproduction of cultural meaning—a site where literature, memory, and identity intersect in dynamic and often contradictory ways.

Figures and Works Under Consideration

Author / Figure	Period	Major Work	Tendency (Centripetal / Centrifugal)	Remarks / Narrative Purpose
Marin Barleti	1450/1460 –?	<i>The Siege of Shkodra, The History of Skanderbeg</i>	Exile to Italy: centrifugal; literary return to Shkodra: centripetal;	Embodies the tension between physical departure (centripetal) and the literary re-inscription of the city (centrifugal). Skanderbeg symbolizes endurance and resistance; Shkodra serves as historical center, symbol, and literary inspiration.

Author / Figure	Period	Major Work	Tendency (Centripetal / Centrifugal)	Remarks / Narrative Purpose
Lekë III Dukagjini	1459 –?	<i>Kanun of Dukagjini</i>	Centripetal The codification of the rules	Re-establishes the Dukagjini tradition as a framework for community reorganization and protection, consolidating the city and territory through codified norms.
Jahja Dukagjini	1498 –?	Various poems	Centrifugal -centripetal	Symbolically distances himself from Shkodra; proud of origin yet not an active narrative center. Physical and cultural remoteness illustrates centrifugal tendencies.
Father Erasmo Balneo	1756 – 1788	<i>Diary on the Bushatlis</i>	Centripetal / institutional	Documents relations between Mehmet Pasha the Elder and Kara Mahmut Pasha, reaffirming Shkodra as an institutional and geographical center of reference.
Father Zef Pllumi	20th century	<i>The Friar of the Bushatli Pashas of Shkodra</i>	Centripetal / historical memory	Revives Shkodra's history after 250 years, preserving memory and documenting the city as center of events and social relations.
Ridvan Dibra	20th–21st c.	<i>Sleep on Snow</i>	Centrifugal/ identity existential	Leaving the city provokes identitarian existential tensions. Narratives show symbolic distancing from the center, shifting to individual and social reflection.
Stefan Çapaliku	20th–21st c.	<i>An Angel Dressed in Tails</i>	Centripetal/ cultural	The character Pol Gjakova becomes the heart of those who love music in a city under a dictatorship. But this kind of focus turns out to be fatal to him.

References

- Alija, E. (2018). Letërsia Shqipe si metafizikë dhe transhëndencë. Tiranë: Sh.B. Naimi.
 Barleti, M. (2005). Historia e Skënderbeut. (S. I. Prifti, Trad.) Tiranë: InfBotues.
 Barleti, M. (2012). Rrethimi i Shkodrës (De absidione Scodrensi). (H. Lacaj, Trad.) Tiranë:

Onufri.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Çabej, E. (1968). «Meshari» i Gjon Buzukut (1555): botim kritik, Volume 1. Tiranë: Çabej.

Çabej, E. (1994). *Shqiptarët midis Perëndimit dhe Lindjes (Ese)*. Tiranë: MÇM.

Çapaliku, S. (2022). *Një engjëll veshë me frak*. Lezhë: Gjergj Fishta.

Certeau, M. d. (1984). *L'invention du quotidien /The Practice of Everyday Life*. (S. Rendal, Trad.) Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Dibra, R. (2016). *Gjumi mbi borë*. Tiranë: Onufri.

Dukagjini, L. (2015). *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*. Tiranë: Kuvendi.

Elsie, R. (1992). *Albanian Literature in the Moslem Tradition, Eighteenth and early nineteenth century Albanian writing Arabic script*. *Oriens*, 33, 287-206.

Muhadri, B. (2021). "The Code of Leke Dukagjini" in *Optics of the Italian Writer*, Giuseppe Castalietti. *AnglisticumJournal (IJLLIS)*, X(I), 76-82. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4480226>

Pllumi, A. Z. (2004). *Fрати i pashallarëve Bushatli të Shkodrës (At Erasmo Balneo, 1756-1788)*. Shkodër: Botime Françeskane.

Pllumi, A. Z. (2015). *Rrno vetëm për me tregue I (III ed.)*. Shkodër: Botime Françeskane.

Sefercioğlu, M. N. (2016). *Taşlıcalı Yahyâ Bey ve Dukakin-zâde Ahmed Bey Divanlarında Musîkî Âletleri*. *Uluslararası Beşeri Bilimler ve Eğitim Dergisi (IJHE)*, II(2), 158-186.