Albania – A country in transition

Aspects of changing identities in a south-east European country

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Extracts
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Preface

by Frank Kressing

The objective of this volume is to draw attention to several aspects of social and cultural life in contemporary Albania from an anthropological perspective. Even now, at the beginning of the 21st century, this country of south-eastern Europe remains one of the least known areas of the whole continent. Despite the fact that Albania is facing a transition and severe disruption, the number of scholars from the sphere of cultural studies who are involved in research in this country is surprisingly low.

After the country’s extreme isolation was abandoned in 1990, the dominant trends of development over the last decade have been:

- the introduction of a privately organised economy and capitalist system
- polarisation along the lines of political parties
- transition to democratic structures
- the persistence of authoritarian structures in political leadership
- the contrast between Gheg-speaking northern Albania and the Tosk-speaking south
- The ‘national question’ concerning Albanian minorities (or regional majorities, respectively) in the neighbouring regions of former Yugoslavia (Kosova/o, Macedonia, Montenegro) and in Greece, and the effects of these ethnic conflicts on Albania
- The influence of the Albanian diaspora (Italy, the U.S., central Europe) on economy, politics, and ideology in Albania
- Contradictory external influences: Due to its diverse cultural background and its historically developed, intermediate position between East and West, contemporary Albania is once again (as often before) effected by Western (European and North American) and Eastern influences from Turkey and the predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East.

Not all these topics can be addressed in depth in this publication. Instead, emphasis will be on the question of how cultural, ethnic, regional and religious identities have changed over the past ten years of post-Communist development. Because public interest and the international agenda at the end of the 20th century were largely concentrated on Kosova/o, this volume will limit itself to Albania proper and refer to developments in the neighbouring Albanian-inhabited regions of Kosova/o, Macedonia, Montenegro only for reasons of comparison with the situation in Albania itself.

Perception and images of Albania are both the theme of the editors’ initial contributions. From a western European perspective, Albania is often conceived as an ‘alien’ or ‘not quite European’ nation. This prevailing view is the topic of Frank Kressing’s introduction (‘General Remarks on Albania and the Albanians’) in which he focuses on the historically developed position of Albania as a marginal country within Europe. This marginalisation has led to the establishment of certain myths and stereotypes concerning Albanians and Albanian-inhabited areas. Karl Kaser’s contribution draws attention to constructed images of ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Balkans’ which merge in the prevailing public perception of Albania and thus become a per-
fect example of the ‘Orientalisation of the Balkans’ – a perception which was nurtured by the prevalence of Islam in the country (at least until World War II). The role of this formerly dominant religion is highlighted in Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain’s contribution on recent, particularly post-Communist, development and disruption of specific Albanian forms of Islam.

Within Albanian Islam, folk Islam and different dervish fraternities, especially the Sufi tarikat of the Bektashis, could establish themselves. In his ‘Preliminary Account of Research Regarding the Albanian Bektashis’, Frank Kressing discusses the myths which surrounded this deviant form of Islam, and the absence of research on both the Bektashis’ contemporary ritual life and their role in post-Communist Albania.

In Albanian-inhabited areas, gender relations have been determined by patriarchy for centuries, if not even for millennia. Antonia Young (‘Women’s Lack of Identity and the Myth of Their Security under Albanian Patriarchy’) gives an account of the persistence of these patriarchal structures, especially in the northern highlands, and of the modifications which occur in recent times. Young points out the difficulty women have achieving even the slightest changes in patriarchal structures.

Not only after the collapse of Communism, when thousands of Albanians left their home country, but for a number of centuries, migration as a result of inhospitable living conditions has been the fate of many (mostly male) Albanians. The long tradition of part-time and permanent emigration from the country is emphasised in Silvia Santner-Schriebel’s contribution on migration within Albania (‘From the Northern Highlands to the Cities of the Plains’) as well as in Robert Pichler’s ‘Strategies of Migrant Workers in the Highland Villages of Southern Albania’. Pichler stresses the tradition of migration during the 19th and 20th centuries – a tradition which was only briefly curtailed by the country’s isolation during the regime of Enver Hoxha. Meanwhile, permanent migration and labour migration became major factors determining living conditions in many parts of Albania. This lead to a very intense encounter with previously alien ways of life in the country (stressed by Santner-Schriebel) and abroad (exemplified by Pichler). These experiences caused far-reaching changes in concepts and perceptions of everyday life and individual and collective identities, as is indicated by the change of names in Albanian immigrants to Greece.

Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers’ account of the Aromanians‘ or Vlahs‘ ‘national awakening‘ (‘Dawn for a Beauty ‘Sleeping Nation”) in Albania shows how the sudden confrontation with foreign influences (that had not been accessible before) lead to shifting representations of identity and ethnicity. In the last decade, the revival of an independent ethnic identity took place among the Aromanians. This was enhanced by intensified (and formerly impossible) contacts to Greece (through the Orthodox church) and Romania (by linguistic affiliation). Taking the national minority of the Aromanians as an example, Schwandtner-Sievers demonstrates the identity construction processes that took place among the Albanian Aromanians after transnational contacts and orientations occur, and the extent to which an awareness of ethnic identity is used to gain support from abroad.

These articles do not represent a single outlook on the current situation in Albania, but discuss, from different viewpoints, ethnic and social identity in times of transition and disruption. Together, the articles present a vivid picture of shifting identities, self-perception and
perpetuated images in one of the still least known regions of Europe.

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Editorial Remarks

All place names are given in their Albanian version - in the determinate form for female gender (e.g. Tirana instead of Tirani) and in the indeterminate form for male gender (e.g. Durrës instead of Durrësi) according to the conventions outlined in Hetzer & Finger.1 Place names from the Albanian-inhabited areas outside of Albania are given in a bilingual version, with the Albanian name followed by the respective Serbian, Macedonian, Greek form etc. (for instance: Janina [Greek Ioánnina]). Anglicised names (if they exist) of more important places are given in brackets, or as a footnote, as well (in this case Yannina).2 As an exception from this rule, in the case of Kosova/o, due to reasons of political sentiment, this mixed Albanian/Serbo-Croatian form is consistently given. For the convenience of the English-speaking reader and general comprehension, most expressions with an Islamic, e.g. Turko-Arabic background, appear in an anglicised version, e.g. haji instead of hacı (Modern Turkish) or haxhi (Albanian), hoja instead of hoca/hoxha.

Notes on the Pronunciation of Albanian

The modern, Latin-derived Albanian alphabet was decided upon at Monastir in 1908. Vowels are pronounced roughly similar to continental European languages except ė which resembles a murmured vowel (in case it is unstressed) and is pronounced approximately like German or Turkish ö (when stressed). y is always a vowel, never a (semi-)consonant, and pronounced like ü in German or Turkish, or u in French.

Consonants are pronounced like in English, except the following:

- c is pronounced like ts, or like in Slavonic languages
- ç like ch in English
- dh like th in them (voiced)
- j like y in English, never like j in James
- gj is a voiced palatal sound, pronounced like a combination of d and y, almost like j in English
- l like in German or French
- ll like l in English
- nj like ñ in Spanish niño, or gn in French cognac
- q is the voiceless equivalent to gj, pronounced roughly like tu in nurwue
- th like English thief (voiceless)
- rr is a thrilled r like in Spanish perro
- x is pronounced dz, or like z in Italian mezzo
- xh is the voiced equivalent to ç, pronounced like English j (voiced)
- zh like j in French jour, or like in Russian zhena

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3 Albanian Manastiri, nowadays Bitola in southwestern Macedonia, east of Lake Prespa.
General Remarks on Albania and the Albanians

by Frank Kressing

1. Introduction

The countries of southeastern Europe occupy an intermediate position between the central and western parts of the continent, and the Middle East. Geographic proximity to the Anatolian peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean as well as 600 years of Muslim influence contributed to the cultural shape of the Balkans. In the post-World War II period, all the southeast European states except Greece orientated themselves along the lines of a socialist model of society. This orientation enhanced differences from western Europe. After the breakdown of the Socialist systems in eastern and central Europe, supposedly ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts broke out in a very violent manner – a fact contributing to Western perception of the Balkans as an alien region within Europe. The underlying thesis of this article is that cultural, political, and linguistic differences between southeastern Europe and other regions of the European continent are often exaggerated in public discussion and media coverage, leading to the public perception that people in the Balkans – especially Albanians – have been shaped by so-called Oriental influences to a much larger degree than is actually the case. At the beginning of the article, a few general facts on language, ethnicity, and religion in Albania and the Albanian-inhabited areas will be given.

2. Albania and the Albanians

The Albanian language constitutes the mother tongue of six to seven million people worldwide. Outside of Albania (with possibly up to 3.9 million inhabitants in the beginning of the 21st century) and Kosovo/o (roughly two million), Albanian-speaking minorities live in Macedonia (23% of the population), Montenegro (7%), and southern Italy (appr. 100,000 Arbëresh). Traces of Albanian populations can also be found in Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine (4,000 people), and Egypt. Descendants of Albanian overseas emigrants nowadays live as far afield as Argentina, the US (predominantly in Boston and Detroit), and Australia.

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7 Macedonia had roughly two million inhabitants in 1991. According to official figures, 427,000 of them were Albanians, cf. Boden, Nationalitäten, Minderheiten und ethnische Konflikte in Europa, 192. Albanians living in Macedonia claim that one third of the country’s population are ethnic Albanians, cf. Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 517.

8 Amounting to 41,000 persons in 1991 according to Boden, Nationalitäten, Minderheiten und ethnische Konflikte in Europa, 154. In all of former Yugoslavia, the percentage of Albanians already amounted to more than 9% of the population in 1991, then constituting the fifth-largest ethnic group of the whole country, cf. Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 516, 517. The same author gives a figure of 5.6 million Albanians in whole of Europe, ibid., 516.

9 Boden, Nationalitäten, Minderheiten und ethnische Konflikte in Europa, 37.

10 Buenos Aires alone is said to have an Albanian-affiliated population of 40,000 people.
Within southeastern Europe, Albania is one of the smallest states\textsuperscript{11} and the country with the most homogenous population: according to the national census of 1989, only 2\% of the inhabitants were members of ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{12} These minorities are comprised of approximately 60,000 Greeks in the south, between 5,000 and 15,000 Macedonians and Montenegrins in the north and east; between 30,000 and 50,000 Vlahs or Aromanians (who in 1900 still constituted 20\% of the country's population)\textsuperscript{13} and approximately 100,000 Roma (Gypsies).\textsuperscript{14} These numbers are, however, a matter of constant debate: the number of Vlahs might be much higher,\textsuperscript{15} and Greek sources speak of up to 600,000 Albanians of Greek descent - a number that has to be severely questioned.\textsuperscript{16}

Until World War II, Islam was the dominant religion in Albania. Before 1967, about 70\% of the Albanian population was Muslim (among these 25\% were members of the Dervish order of the \textit{Bektashiyya}), 20\% were Orthodox Christians, and another 10\% were Catholics.\textsuperscript{17} Under Communist rule, the adherents of Islam as well as Christianity were subject to severe prosecution, especially after the official abolition of all religious activities in 1967.\textsuperscript{18} Thereafter, most clerics (Christian priests as well as Muslim hojas) were either imprisoned or executed, and only clandestine religious activities could take place.

Post-1991, after the rigid, anti-religious policy of the Hoxha regime, all four major religions re-emerged in Albania.\textsuperscript{19} Since then, a general revival of religion has been observed in Albania.\textsuperscript{20} Religion became one of several factors determining the country's historically developed position between the West (western Europe, the U.S.), and the Muslim-oriented countries of the Middle East, leading to competing religious identities among the Albanian population.\textsuperscript{21} In the contemporary period of transition, it has to be acknowledged that an individual’s adherence to one faith might shift or be combined with another belief.\textsuperscript{22} Western missionaries (Mormons, Baptists, Pentecostalists, Scientologists) as well as Muslim congregations (Sunnis and Shi‘ites) pursue an active policy of religious conversion.\textsuperscript{23} In 1992, the country joined the Conference of Islamic States.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{11} Albania has an area of 28,748 sq km; only Slovenia and Macedonia are smaller in size, cf. Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 13.
\textsuperscript{12} Boden, Nationalitäten, Minderheiten und ethnische Konflikte in Europa, 34; Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 505.
\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Ludwig, Ethnische Minderheiten in Europa, 30.
\textsuperscript{14} Boden, Nationalitäten, Minderheiten und ethnische Konflikte in Europa, 34; Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 505-514.
\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Schwandner-Sievers in this volume.
\textsuperscript{16} Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 505-509.
\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Bartl, Religionsgemeinschaften und Kirchen, 587; Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 62.
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 44: ‘In an inter-war period dominated by the Muslim Zog, the Bektashi Order, expelled from Turkey, became an important national influence (Birge, 1937; Irwin, 1984). However, the localised strength of Roman Catholicism in the north and Orthodoxy in the south, their „external“ inspiration and potential divisiveness (Kennedy, 1939), meant that religion was a relatively easy target for the post-war communist government, seeking to establish its own unifying emblems.’
\textsuperscript{19} Bartl, Religionsgemeinschaften und Kirchen, 612-614.
\textsuperscript{20} Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 47.
\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Lakshman-Lepain in this volume.
\textsuperscript{22} Lakshman-Lepain, Religions between tradition and pluralism, 10,11.
\textsuperscript{23} Lakshman-Lepain, Religions between tradition and pluralism, 10,11; Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 49.
\textsuperscript{24} Gashi/Steiner, Albanien, 85; Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 198.
Due to its almost complete political isolation for 45 years, Albania was widely unknown to the western and eastern European public alike until ten years ago. But even before Hoxha regime’s isolation policy following World War II, Albania was already a neglected corner of Europe. This is for indicated, for example, by the German ethnographer Hugo Bernatzik’s depiction of it as ‘Europe's forgotten country’ as early as 1930. Due to Albania’s very poor infrastructure, it has not been able to keep pace with the rest of Europe. Thus it is not only the remote rural areas which are inaccessible to travellers from other countries. Extreme inaccessibility applies especially to the northern mountainous region called Malësia e madhe. The topography has caused a strong dialectical splitting of the Albanian language, and the prevalence of many archaic traits within the Albanian culture and society, for instance folk magic, tribal structures, customary law (the *kanun*), and patriarchal family structures.

Although Albania is geographically situated in the centre of the Mediterranean world, Byzantine and subsequently Ottoman rule prevented Western influences on the country. Even Eastern influences affected the country only to a limited extent: continuous subjugation under foreign powers fostered a deep-rooted willingness to resist any kind of central authority. The inhospitable physical conditions of the country and a marginal position relative to Constantinople/Istanbul further contributed to the difficulty that any administration experienced exerting its influence on the country. It was especially hard for those in power to gain foothold in the mountainous areas of northern Albania. Thus, it appears that large portions of the country were not always controlled by the successive external powers, and people handled their affairs independent of government intervention. Until the middle of the 20th century, the Gheg speaking highlands of northern Albania were regarded as the last remaining tribal area of Europe. The combination of 500 years of Ottoman dominance and 40 years of isolation under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha has created a very distinct character for Albania that has been described as Archaic - Oriental - European.

It is hardly surprising that Albania’s marginal status has fostered myths and stereotypes of the country and its inhabitants, such as that Albanians are violent and continuously engaged in blood-revenge. Unfortunately, these stereotypes still prevail to a certain degree in countries
with Albanian immigrant populations and continue to shape the public perception of Albanians in western Europe. As in many other cases of stereotype images of certain cultures or populations, this perception of Albanians is in itself contradictory: Apart from the wild and ‘barbaric’ Albanian, there is the stereotype of the humble, proud, brave and righteous mountaineer. Both images were enhanced by writers of the 19th and 20th century, with their own genre of literature developing around the institution of blood feuding.32

One of these stereotypes which is applied not only to Albania, but to the Balkan region as a whole, is that this part of Europe is frequently shattered by unpredictable outbreaks of violence. It is widely held public opinion that southeast Europe as a whole is a backward area, somewhat ‘behind’ the rest of the continent. Contrary to this widely held assumption, it will be shown that the marginal position of the Balkan peninsula developed through historical incidents and cannot be applied to prehistoric and early historic times.

4. Ethnic and Historical Backgrounds of the Albanians

4.1. Present Albanian-settled Areas in Prehistoric and Classical Times

From the 7th millennium B.C. onwards, the Balkan peninsula was far more advanced in agricultural evolution, animal husbandry and metallurgy than central Europe.33 Techniques connected with these cultural achievements were only later transmitted to Central Europe by the Neolithic cultures in the Balkan-Danube area.34 From these times, no names of ethnic groups or language affiliations have survived, so the identity of these peoples still remains speculative.35 Things changed dramatically with the second half of the fourth millennium B.C. when three waves of Indo-European immigration disrupted the long-lasting development of formerly neolithic-agrarian cultures in the Balkans.36 After that, three different ethno-linguistic

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31 Cf. Gashi/Steiner, Albainien. For the effects and motivations behind this kind of ‘orientalisation’ see Kaser's contribution to this volume.
32 Cf. Kaser, Hirten, Kämpfer, Stammeshelden. Especially in the German-speaking countries, this genre influenced the view of Albanians as brave and proud ‘Skipetars’ (derived from Albanian shqiptarë) re-enforced in the novel Durch das Land der Skipetaren – ‘Through the Land of the Shqiptars’ by Karl May. This genre of writing was further nourished by World War II veterans who depicted Albanians (especially the northern mountaineers) as heroic people, an example being the German diplomat Walter Peinsipp (cf. Peinsipp, Das Volk der Shkypetaren). This contradictory depiction of Albanians has striking parallels in the stereotypes that emerged surrounding indigenous peoples of North America, or Kurdish and Pashtun warriors in British military reports, Pichler, personal communication.
33 Cf. Renfrew, Der Ursprung der indoeuropäischen Sprachfamilie, 63; Merpert, Ethnocultural change in the Balkans on the border between the eneolithic and early bronze age, 123: ‘As early as the 'Pre-ceramic Neolithic', i.e. not later than the seventh millennium B.C., early agricultural settlements appeared in the Balkans ... It was here that the early agricultural communities of Europe that served as a foundation for all of its later development began.’
34 Cf. Merpert, Ethnocultural change in the Balkans on the border between the eneolithic and early bronze age, 125: ‘Indeed, the Balkan peninsula was the breeding ground for the formation of the early agricultural zones in Eastern and Central Europe.’
35 Merpert, Ethnocultural change in the Balkans on the border between the eneolithic and early bronze age, 126.
36 ‘Studien besagen, daß drei indoeuropäische Einwanderungswellen zwischen dem dritten und dem ersten Jahrtausend vor Chr. die lange Entwicklung von neolithischen Kulturen auf dem Balkan unterbrochen hätten.’ Kaser, Familie und Verwandtschaft auf dem Balkan, 67, 68; cf. Merpert, Ethnocultural change in the Balkans on the border between the eneolithic and early bronze age: ‘During that period the stable development of the early agricultural Balkan-Danube zone and the continuity of its cultures was drastically shattered ... by cultures of early cattle- and sheep-breeders of the Caspian and Black Sea steppes and first of all the ancient pit-grave historico-cultural region [p. 127] ... From the point of view of archaeology, the most probable and concretely determined contact zone of the Central European, steppe, Balkan-Danube and Anatolian cultural communication might be connected with the process of formation of concrete groups of the
groups become detectable on the Balkan peninsula which later formed the ‘paleo-Balkanic substratum’.37

(1) Different Hellenic groups in the very southern part of the peninsula, antecedents of the Greeks;
(2) The Thracians in the Eastern part of the peninsula, roughly encompassing present day Romania, Bulgaria, and the European part of Turkey;#
(3) The Illyrians who settled throughout most parts of former Yugoslavia and in contemporary Albania, as well as in parts of southeastern Italy (the Messapians in Apulia).38

According to commonly shared linguistic opinion, each of these groups represents its own branch of the Indo-European family of languages.39 Whether contemporary Albanians are the direct descendants of the ancient Illyrians remains a matter of debate.40 In Albania itself, the theory of an Illyrian origin of the Albanian nation was held as a state doctrine, emphasising the fact that the Albanians constitute a ‘paleo-Balkan population’ just like the Greeks, and that therefore they distinguish themselves from later immigrants like Romanians and Slavs.41

Since few remnants of Illyrian exist in written form, and since the first source of written Albanian dates back only to the year 1462 the quest of the origin of the Albanian language is complicated and remains obscure.42 Although Albanian is not a Latin-derived tongue and oc-


38 Lockwood, Indo-European Philology, 37.
39 Lockwood, A Panorama of Indo-European Languages, 38-42, Renfrew, Der Ursprung der indoeuropäischen Sprachfamilie, 56-64, who claims that this family of genetically related languages is connected with the first agriculturists in Europe and that their spread thus dates back as early as the 7th millennium B.C.
42 Cf. Lockwood, A Panorama of Indo-European Languages, 39, Indo-European Philology, 37: ‘Illyrian was spoken in the western half of the Balkan peninsula north of Greece. Romanisation began as early as 230 B.C., but the language appears to have survived sporadically until the seventh century, when it was finally readmitted by invading Slavs. The language is known from a few glosses and a large number of names. Messapian, spoken in Apulia and (ancient) Calabria until replaced by Latin in the first century A.D., may be regarded as a colonial form of Illyrian. It is only scantily represented in inscriptions beginning in the 5th century B.C. From its geographical position, Albanian has been held to continue ancient Illyrian. Albanian also shows, however, lexical correspondences with Thracian. Research is hampered by the fact that Albanian is only known in its modern form, the earliest text being from 1462. The language has suffered much from phonetic attrition. Its lexicon is extensively romanised, but its grammatical structure is independent.’
cupies an own branch of Indo-European, strong Romance influence on the language is unquestionable and indicated by the existence of many ancient loanwords, e.g. *mi/ku*, friend (from Latin amicus), *qind*, hundred (from Latin centum), and so on. Decisive Roman influence on the Illyrian-settled areas started in the 2nd century B.C. when the region was increasingly incorporated into the Roman Empire through military campaigns. Later on, the eastern Adriatic constituted one of the central regions of the classical Mediterranean World, as indicated by the considerable number of Roman emperors of Illyrian origin. The linguistic latinisation of parts of the southeast European population lead to the emergence of the contemporary Romanians and Aromanians.

Summarising the pre-medieval situation of present-day Albanian settled areas, it should be stressed that these regions occupied a central position in antique trade networks and were well incorporated into Romano-Greek civilisation. This situation changed completely with the begin of the middle ages.

### 4.2. Between East and West – Albanians in the Middle Ages

Due to the partition of the Roman Empire into a western and an eastern portion in the year 395 and the much later schism occurring between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity (11th century), the Albanian-inhabited areas acquired an intermediate position between the West and the East - a constellation which has been maintained until today. Concomitantly, the population in present-day Albania was moved from the centre of the classical Mediterranean World to the margins of the great empires of the time, later reducing the Albanian-settled regions to a constantly disputed area and a battle ground between competing powers. The dispute between the Roman-Catholic and the Byzantine-Orthodox churches also affected the antecedents of the contemporary Albanians and is reflected by the division between the Catholic north and the Orthodox south of Albania, a partition which, together with the strong differentiation between northern and southern dialects of Albanian, persists today.

In the 6th and 7th centuries, the great Slav migration wave became the ethnically and linguistically determining factor in southeastern Europe. Slav tribes were leaving their previous territories in present-day Ukraine and extended as far as contemporary eastern Germany, Austria, and the whole Balkan peninsula. The aboriginal population of the Balkans, being of Helenic, Illyrian, and Thracian origin and being partly romanised, was either replaced or assimilated by the newcomers. Ethnic survivors were the Romanians, the Aromanians or Vlahs,

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43 Comparable to the Romanic, Germanic, Celtic, Baltic or Slavonic branch, meaning that only distant genetic relations to either Greek, Romanian or Slav languages exist.

44 Gashi/Steiner, Albanien, 47; Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 49.

45 Also called Vlahs; cf. Kaser, Hirten, Kämpfer, Stammesmelden, 150, Familie und Verwandtschaft auf dem Balkan, 72; Malcolm, Kosovo – A Short History, 39. Their self-designation is Aromân, Armân, Român or Ramân, respectively, cf. Schwandner-Siever’s contribution to this volume.

46 Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 5; Vickers The Albanians. A Modern History, 3.

47 Gheg and Tosk; Hetzer & Finger, Lehrbuch der Vereinheitlichten Albanischen Schriftsprache, 2; Lockwood, Indo-European Philology, 186, 187.


49 Kaser, Familie und Verwandtschaft auf dem Balkan, speaks about a ‘symbiosis’ between Vlachs, Slavs, and Albanians, mentioning that, later in the 10th and 11th centuries, the Vlachs or Aromanians were assimilated by Slavs to a larger extent than the ancient Albanians. He adds (p. 73): ‘Archäologen glauben aus den Fun-
and the Albanians. Between the 7th and the 12th century, an Albanian ethnos emerged, known as Arbër in those days, which persisted under temporary Serbian and Bulgarian as well as under Byzantine domination on the territory of present-day Albania. In 1190, the first Albanian feudal state of Arbëria or Arbanon with Kruja as its capital was proclaimed.

The term Albans to denote the population of this area emerged in the 11th century: In the following centuries, the Albanians expanded their territory in southern and southeastern directions, reaching Thessalia in the 13th and the Peloponnessos in the 14th century. An independent Albanian principality, governed by the three families of Dukagjin (north), Kastriot (centre), and Arianit (south), was established during the 14th and 15th centuries while the Venetians were able to establish themselves at Durrës, Shkodra, and Bar.

4.3. Albanians under Ottoman Rule

The Ottoman conquest of southeastern Europe started in the late Middle Ages, and was fiercely resisted by Albanian troops under the leadership of Gjergji Kastrioti ‘Skanderbeg’ in the 15th century. When, after Skanderbeg’s death (1468), the Albanian-settled areas were finally subjugated under Ottoman rule in 1501, thousands of Albanians fled from the country and founded settlements in southern Italy, where their descendants are known as Arberësh today. Albanians in the homeland, on the other hand, designated themselves as Shqiptarë.
With the advent of Ottoman power, there was Muslim influence on the Albanians, but it lasted until the 17th and 18th centuries, until the majority of Albanians embraced the new faith. Besides the Bosnian Muslims, Albanians were the only people in southeastern Europe of whom the majority converted to Islam. The are several reasons to account for this:

- opportunism, as many travellers of the 19th century pointed out
- lack of a deep-rooted faith in Christianity
- economic reasons
- a strong substratum of folk religion
- or a prevailing pragmatic attitude towards religion in general.

The conversion to Islam allowed many Albanians to occupy leading position in the administration and armed forces of the Ottoman Empire, with the elite troops of the arnauts being considered as ‘gendarmes of the Balkans’. They were often employed to subdue local and regional rebellions, especially by Christian subjects (reyah) of the Ottoman padishah.

With the Albanian majority's conversion to Islam, a widening gap between them and the Christian Balkan nations (Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians) arose. In southern Albania, a class of feudal landlords (beyler) emerged, whereas the north remained in the hands of semi-autonomous tribes who tried to reduce the influence of the Turkish governors as much as possible, living under the customary law of the kanun and electing their own bayraktars (chieftains).

At the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, two Albanians vizirs (governors) of the Ottoman Empire made successful attempts to establish independent territories and faced the Porte with open revolt. One of them was Ali Pasha of Tepelena (1741-1822), who established an semi-independent state in the vilayet (province) of Janina, the other Mehmet Ali in Egypt. Both

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62 Young, Religion and society in present-day Albania, 7, with references to Norris, Islam in the Balkans and Malcolm, Kosovo. A Short History, points out that a ‘distinction between Islamization and Ottomanization’ has to be made in this respect.

63 Cf. Hahn, Albanesische Studien; Vickers, The Albanians. A Modern History, 16, 17: ‘Throughout their turbulent history Albanians had shifted with relative ease from one religion to another: Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim according to momentary interests. During the late middle ages, their country had become the battlefield between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East: whenever the west was advancing, the Albanian feudal lords - often followed by their population - espoused Catholicism; whenever Byzantium was the victor and the West retreated, they embraced Orthodoxy ... The Albanian saying 'Ku është shpata është feja' - 'Where the sword is, there lies religion' - is directly related to this history. Of all the Balkan subjects, the Albanians were most inclined to convert to Islam.'

64 Bartl, Die albanischen Muslime zur Zeit der nationalen Unabhängigkeit, 21.

65 Bartl, ibid., 18.

66 Cf. Çabej, Albanische Volkskunde, 349, 350; Eberhardt/Kaser, Albanien – Stammesleben zwischen Tradition und Moderne; Lakshman-Lepain, Religions zwischen tradition and pluralism.

67 Skendi, Balkan Cultural Studies; Young, Religion and society in present-day Albania, 6, 7.

68 Cf. Norris, Islam in the Balkans, 37. Arnavutlar in Turkish which is also the designation for Albanians in general.

69 Malcolm, Kosovo – A Short History, 95.


71 Cf. Whitaker 1968, Tribal structure and national politics in Albania.


73 Also known as Muhammad Ali; cf. Vickers, The Albanians. A Modern History, 18, 238, footnote 12: ‘Mehmet Ali was an Albanian born in Kavalla (now in northern Greece), who had come to Egypt an officer in the Albanian contingent of the Ottoman expeditionary force against France. In 1803 he became leader of that corps and established himself as de facto ruler of Egypt. In 1808 he was officially recognised as governor of Egypt by the Sultan.'
revolts have to be viewed as individual aspirations for power rather than rebellions against Ottoman authority motivated by nationalism. Due to religious ties of the Albanian majority population with the ruling Ottoman Turks and the virtual lack of an Albanian state in history, nationalism was less developed among Albanians in the 19th century than among other southeast European nations. Only from the 1870s onwards did a movement of ‘national awakening’ (rilindja) evolve among them - greatly delayed, compared to the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and Romanians.74

4.4. The Emergence of Nation-States in the Balkans

Among the Christian nations in the Balkans, nationalism lead to numerous uprisings against Ottoman rule in the 19th century, which were supported by Austria-Hungary (the Habsburg monarchy) and Russia. As a result, the core areas of Greece became independent in 1830, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania in 1878, Bulgaria in 1908, whereas Albania and Rumelia75 remained under Turkish rule until 1912. The immediate aim of the freshly independent Balkan nationalities (or their political leaders) was to enlarge their territorial base and to gather all members of their nation in a unified state. It is not surprising after several hundred years of Muslim domination, that one base of nationalism was religion and the assumption that ethnic and religious identity should be combined. Thus, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians became identified as Orthodox Christians, Croats as Catholics. All Muslims were considered to be Turks, preventing for a long time the emergence an ethnically-derived identity among Bosnian Muslims and Pomaks. As an exception among the Balkan nations, Albanians were split up among four different religious congregations (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Christian-Orthodox, Catholic) which gave credence to the popular saying ascribed to Pashko Vasa Shkodrani, ‘The true religion of the Albanian is to be Albanian’.76

Contrary to the claim of the newly emerged states to create nationally homogenous territories, bewildering multi-ethnical compositions were typical for the southeast European states at the beginning of the 20th century, and even more so in the territories that remained under Ottoman rule, especially in Rumelia, with Slav Macedonians, Aromanians/Vlahs, Albanians, Greeks, Turks, Muslim Pomaks, Christian Bulgars, Gypsies, and even Armenians living side by side. National aspirations lead to the First Balkan War (1912/1913), during which the allied forces of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro partitioned the bulk of the remaining Ottoman territories in southeastern Europe. In the following Second Balkan War (1913), the so-called Macedonian Question lead to armed conflict between Serbia and Bulgaria and the defeat of the latter. During the 20th century, ‘ethnic cleansing’ became a common practise, being al-

74 Cf. Bartl, Die Albaner, 178, 179; Hall, Albania and the Albanians, 8; Vickers, The Albanians. A Modern History, 27, 28; King, Minorities under Communism, 8: ‘The Turks virtually eliminated the local nobility as they conquered the Balkans, preferring to control their subjects indirectly through religious leaders. Since religious leaders were the most conscious segment of Balkan society, nationalism in the Balkans was strongly influenced by religious identification. Albanians are the exception.’ Another indication for this delayed nationalism is the fact that a Latin-derived script for the Albanian language was only developed in 1908, and that it took as long as 1974 to create a standard version of written Albanian, cf. Hetzer/Finger, Lehrbuch der Vereinheitlichten Albanischen Schriftsprache.
75 Encompassing the regions of contemporary Macedonia, Thracia and southern Bulgaria.
76 Gashi/Steiner, Albanien, 101; cf. Hall, Albania and the Albanians: ‘Albanian national identity has tended to coincide with race and language, rather than with religion. Geographically midway between Rome and Constantinople; Christian Albanian lands had been divided between a Roman Catholic north and an Orthodox south ever since the religious schism of 1054.’
ready well established during the Turkish massacres of Armenians between 1895 and the 1920s. In a not so different manner, during the euphemistically labelled ‘exchange of populations’ between Greece and Turkey, almost two million people were made refugees on both sides,77 including Muslim Albanians from Çamëria78 who were expelled from Greece as supposed ‘Turks’.

Despite repeated attempts to create ethnically homogenous territories by military force, even nowadays none of the national borders in southeastern Europe corresponds any ethnic group’s settlement – as in most parts of the world. Instead, the dispersal of different nationalities has lead to the existence of national minorities in every state.

5. Independent Albania - Isolation and Contradictory External Influences79

As a result of the two Balkan Wars in the early 20th century, Albania gained its indepen-dence in 1913, excluding the predominantly Albanian populated region of Kosova/o. Thus, only 0.8 millions of an estimated ethnic Albanian population of 1.5 million were included in the newly founded state.

After an interim government of the German Prince Wied, King Ahmet Zogu, chief of the Matj tribe living north of Tirana, assumed power in the country and gave rise to the so-called ‘royal dictatorship’ in Albania.80 In 1938, Fascist Italy annexed the country,81 in 1943 German troops moved in, meeting resistance by National (Balli Kombëtar) and Communist liberation movements, the latter being led by Enver Hoxha82 After the victory of the Communists, opposition against Yugoslavia was the dominating factor in Albanian politics, finally leading to almost complete isolation of the country after previous alliances with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China were abandoned.

After decades of isolation, Albania was again subject to contradictory outside influences in the 1990s, as so many times in her history before. Besides Western investments from the U.S. and different western European countries (especially Italy), economic support is launched by Turkey, the Gulf States, and Iran.83 When, after the very rigid and brutal policy of anti-clerical prosecution under the regime of Enver Hoxha, the ban on religion was lifted in 1990, religious life re-emerged again in the country.

77 Approximately 430,000 Muslims (including Turks, Pomaks and Albanians) had to leave Greek territory, and 1.4 million Greek Orthodox people (including Turkish-speaking Gagauz) had to leave Asia Minor, Istanbul and Thracia; cf. Lienau, Die Muslime Griechenlands, 49; Peyfuss, Religious confession and national-ity in the case of the Albanians, 127, 134; Ronneberg, Bevölkerungsstruktur (Griechenland), 378.
78 Cf. Schukalla, Nationale Minderheiten in Albanien und Albaner im Ausland, 524. Çamëria is the area south of the Greek-Albanian border, referred to as ‘southern Epiros’ in official Greek sources; ibid., 523.
79 On the following pages, there can be no attempt to give a thorough history of the independent Albanian state in the 20th century. Instead, only a few general developments will be touched upon to serve as back-ground information for the other contributions to this volume.
81 Ibid., 137.
82 Cf. Neuwirth, Der Partisanenkampf in Albanien.
83 Cf. Lakshman-Lepain in this volume.
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Albania: Orientalisation and Balkanisation of a Balkan Country - a Contribution to an Ongoing Debate
by Karl Kaser

1. Introduction

Since the middle of the 1980s I have been travelling to Albania on a regular basis. My first stay in the country was the year the dictator Enver Hoxha died (1985); before that, I only knew the country from TV football transmissions. At that time, the Albanian border was closed for people without special invitations and also for those who did not like the kind of guided tours organised by Alb-Tourist. It happened very often that a man’s splendid haircut was destroyed by a merciless haircutter at the border station or the wonderful moustache shaved off – all because Albania was a special country with a special regime. Thus, Albania was not accessible to the ordinary person and I remember several times being at the Macedonian or Montenegrin border with Albania vainly seeking permission to cross. I never met people who had visited the country and could give me a description of what was going on there. Finally, I obtained the desired special permission to enter the country and to work several weeks at the National library. I travelled with Karl May images in my head – although my reason told me something different - and I expected to be confronted with the exotic. I was shocked when I left the national Rinas Airport for Tirana and for the duration of my whole stay. My feelings are hard to describe:

The country was neither exotic nor was it like I expected. I was not allowed to go to the regions in the northern parts of Albania, which I knew from ethnographic descriptions from the first half of the 20th century. The country was for me like a desert in a metaphorical sense: The people were obviously very poor, the industrial facilities in terrible condition. There were almost no cars – even in the streets of the capital Tirana - and churches and mosques had been transformed into machine halls and sports facilities; there was a poor electricity service. They treated me as delegación - as a delegation from a foreign country and provided me with a car, driver and several young students for company, who now play major roles in public life. Except for conversations with the driver and the students I was completely isolated. It was not possible to talk with ordinary people (they could be sentenced to seven years in prison for this), or to visit a restaurant or bar – except for the two hotels devoted to foreign guests. I felt like a bird in a cage. I hated this situation, and at the same time I was curious to learn more about the population despite the unfavourable circumstances. The country was bizarre and I had some equally bizarre experiences. One of the strangest was when I was asked to officially visit the grave of Enver Hoxha, which was then close to the ‘Mother of Albania” memorial on a hill in Tirana. They brought me a bouquet, which I – a 29 year-old simple historian, long-haired and bearded - had to lay at the grave in a kind of ceremony.

I am relating this story and these personal experiences because this is related to the process called Orientalisation or Balkanisation. When I returned back home I had not only slides to show but also a package of incredible stories which I could present to the audience. Thus, the images of Karl May for many people became mixed up with my sensational accounts. I felt a responsibility to report about this country, but not responsible for the discourse I actually initiated or was part of (this has, of course, meanwhile changed).
When we are trying to categorise the kinds of relevant discourses, we have to decide whether we use the word ‘Orientalisation’ or ‘Balkanisation’. The suggested thesis – at least for the German speaking countries - is that the empirical evidence suggests an intermediate stage between Balkanisation and Orientalisation, based on constructed images that are not or only partly related to social reality. The framework for this consists of: first, Karl May, secondly, the isolation of the country until the early 1990s with the subsequent different disturbances and riots, especially in 1997, and their uninviting character. Thirdly, curiosity for a country that is satisfied by reports and narratives with their very often orientalising character. Films like L’America, which documents the background of people who wanted to move to Italy after the breakdown of the Communist regime and which represents social reality in a drastic way, do not change very much; even in Albania itself, it was forbidden for years to show the film in public cinemas.

2. The Debate: Orientalism vs. Balkanism

It was Maria Todorova who pointed out the differences between the two categories of Orientalism and Balkanism. Orientalism was a term put forward by Edward Said when the discussion on the crisis of representation in ethnology and anthropology was in full swing. Orientalism in his view is the invention of an Oriental reality which is essentially in opposition to the West. Whereas for several scholars discourses on the Balkans constitute a variation of Orientalism, Todorova opposes this attitude strictly by analysing the differences between the constructed images of the Orient and the Balkans.

First of all there is the historical and geographic concreteness of the Balkans that stands in opposition to the vagueness of the Orient. In reality, this Orient does not exist except as pure construction - because there are different versions of Orientalism: Ottoman and Turkish Orientalism and variants of Arabic Orientalism. The Orient was utopia, the exotic, the realm of fantastic tales and legends – opposed to the profane world of the West. Whereas the Orient as a historical, contemporary and geographical unit exists only in colonial and post-colonial rhetoric and discourses, the Balkans have had a concrete historical existence, shaped by the historical legacies of the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires. The Ottoman legacy chiefly invoked the current stereotypes of the ‘otherness’ of the Balkans. The Balkans perceived as Ottoman legacy by the West is a reality despite all efforts, including violent ones, to get rid of this legacy. The problems of the transition period during the 1990s fuelled the pictures of this Balkan otherness, cementing the impression that despite all efforts this part of the world is not able to Europeanise itself.

The Western image of the Orient is connected to wealth, emperors with their harems - something that inspired the fantasy of men in the West, and noblemen with unlimited access to resources. Contrast this with the Balkan concreteness and its total lack of wealth, its poverty,

84 Todorova, Imagining the Balkans.
85 Said, Orientalism.
86 Todorova, Imagining the Balkans, 11-13.
absence of exoticism, the people poor but demonstrating archaic hospitality, men uncivilised, primitive, crude, cruel. 87

The Orient is imagined as a complete anti-world to the West; the Balkans, however, as having a transitional status and something ‘semi’: semi-developed, semi-civilised, semi-colonial, semi-oriental:

‘Unlike Orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity. This in-betweenness of the Balkans, their transitional character, could have made them simply an incomplete other; instead they are constructed not as other but as incomplete self.’ 88

This kind of Balkanism was formed in the course of two centuries and crystallised in a specific discourse at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the Balkans are something concrete, Balkanism is construction: The other, strange, negative, non-European Europe. One of the functions of these images is to contribute to the success story of the Western World. It can be measured in concrete terms: economic, GNP etc. The function is also affirmation: Western church against Orthodoxy and Islam, Western values versus Balkan ones. The good needs the bad.

To sum up, Orientalism and Balkanism are two analytic concepts that differ in their modes of relation to social reality. Orientalism as concept and Orient as historical and geographical unit is a vague but completely constructed image of everything opposite to the West. Balkanism is related very specifically to social reality; the construction consists in the perceived non- or semi-Europeanness of the region. Albania and the Albanians have always played a specific role in Balkanising the Balkans. Differently to, e.g., Greeks, Bulgarians or Croats, Albania and the Albanians were at the beginning of the 20th century still at the stage of being ‘unknown’: the last ‘undiscovered’ region in Europe and in the Balkans, full of archaism, blood feuds, tribes – so close and yet so far, and an eldorado for discoverers and adventurers. The situations at the beginning and at the end of the 20th century were similar: good times for orientalisers and balkanisers: journalists, anthropologists, historians and others of this species. Their representations of Albania and the Albanians were not only contributions to Balkanism but also to the genre of Orientalism.

3. Invented Images?

The German-speaking travellers and scholars who visited the Albanian territories at the beginning of the 20th century were mostly Austro-Hungarians. We can categorise them into two groups. The first and serious one consisted of a majority of scholars with a strong interest in the Albania and its history. Several of them belonged to the founding generation of Albanology. It is possible that many of their observations turned out to be wrong or misleading on further research, but they did not participate in inventing a specific Albanian image. To this group belong, e.g., the Austrian consuls in the Albanian regions, like Johann Georg von Hahn 89 and Theodor A. Ippen 90 or the group of historians which contributed to the influential

87 Ibid., 13-14.
88 Ibid., 17-18.
89 Hahn, Albanesische Studien, Reise von Belgrad nach Salonik.
90
two volumes edited by the Hungarian Ludwig von Thallóczy. Konstantin Jireček, Milan von Šufflay and Thallóczy himself. Their contributions are still a useful basis for further studies. The geologist Franz von Nopcsa, Hungarian by origin, can also be counted as belonging to this group. He contributed essentially to the ethnography and ethnology of northern Albania and to the customary law.

The other group of travellers primarily aimed not at conducting scholarly work but at presenting sensational discoveries, most of them published by the influential Carl Patsch, who was the custodian at the Bosnian-Hercegovinian Museum in Sarajevo. They almost exclusively visited the northern Albanian tribal territories and reported from there. Their consciously or unconsciously selected observations represent a certain image of Albania and the Albanian population – a mixture of exoticism, Balkanism and Orientalism. This kind of literature represents a certain stereotype, thus creating an image of Albanians that approximates almost any people in the world - but never Europeans. Here, the emphasis is on primitive laws, archaic blood revenge, forgotten lands, primitiveness and pureness of the indigenous people, spartan simplicity yet incomparable hospitality.

This idea of primitiveness and pureness of a people within a technologically advanced Europe is very strong.

‘Since my early youth I enjoyed the wish to hike alone through remote countries ... I had to decide whether to pass my holidays in the Vilayet Scutari or in the province of Yannina, but did not have to spend long deciding; the question of primitiveness and pureness of the Albanian character decided for me ...’

‘How much of unspent elemental force must slumber in such a people that could preserve its patriarchal customs so purely until the present. What power, what invincibility lies in these tribes, which have not taken anything from any civilisation except the modern repeater carbine!’

This picture is completed by addressing the inhabitants not as ‘inhabitants’ or ‘people’, but as ‘aborigines’:

‘As regards company, deviating from the usual habit of travellers to Albania who usually need a larger number of companions, for me one companion was sufficient ... This simple way of travelling was possible, because I know the Albanian language sufficiently to talk to the aborigines directly.’

Many of the travellers pretended to represent an objective picture of the Albanian people, opposing the images drawn by the neighbouring peoples, but at the same time they created an image, which they – as travellers! - consider positive: blood feud, spartan simplicity and hospitality:

‘At the beginning, I feel obliged to mention that after three journeys I have to state that Albania does not deserve its reputation ... The surrounding Slavs and especially the Montenegrins are

90 Ippen, Skutari und die nordalbanische Küstenebene, Die Gebirge des nordwestlichen Albaniens.
91 Thallöczy, Illyrisch-albanische Forschungen.
92 Nopcsa, Aus Sala und Klementi, Albanien, Bauten, Trachten und Geräte.
93 Cf. Baxhaku/Kaser, Die Stammesgesellschaften Nordalbaniens, 205-428. These are only examples, a complete review of the existing scholarly work is not intended.
94 All the following quotations have been translated by the author.
95 Steinmetz, Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbaniens, foreword.
96 Gerstner, Albanien, 27.
traditional enemies of the Albanians and report over and over again only the worst and most adventorous things about the circumstances in the country ... And when the traveller, so influenced, enters the country and moreover lets the catchwords blood feud, tribal feuds and anarchy take effect on himself and – and when he wants to appear at home as a fearless explorer, penetrating the wildest part of Europe, is then an objective judgement at all possible?"98

As for the problem of blood feud, mentioning it is not avoidable – but even positive for the traveller:

‘The blood feud exists in its cruel consequences justifiably; in a country without authorities that guarantee for life and property this is necessary. Also, tribal feuds rage within parts of the country, mercilessly - like men hunting. But has the foreigner something to do with this? Has any foreigner ever been effected by it in any way? Does blood feud not contribute to his security?"99

‘Blood feud is the main reason for the whole bloodshed, which is conducted by all the four mentioned tribes [Nikaj, Merturi, Šala and Šoši – the author] in brutal consequence. It is unbelievable how single-mindedly the avenger pursues his victim. In many cases the man who is burdened with blood responsibility leaves his tribe in order to escape blood feud, but the avenger does not stop and rest until he sooner or later catches him. It sometimes happened that a Šala man crosses the mountains and passes hostile tribal territories until Djakova or Ipek, in order to take revenge on his enemy, who has tried to escape."100

This fits perfectly into the picture of an archaic people, but also the co-existence of a hospitality unknown in Europe is appropriate:

‘Are these non-European and anachronistic habits not accompanied by characteristics for which Europe and contemporary times would be proud of? There is primarily hospitality; far reaching and unselfish. It has been granted to everybody who has been to the mountains without asking, in all ways ...’101

‘Hospitality, which is unparalleled, can be praised as the most beautiful habit of the Northern Albanian people's character – the Southern Albanians do not know it to this extent – and this alone is sufficient to ease the often tough judgement of other travellers on the Albanians. It is not limited to service for the foreigner, and to pay would be regarded as an offence; it is, as we will see, much more far-reaching ...’102

The image of a spartan simplicity but cordial hospitality is frequently used:

‘The Albanian – and even the priests are children of the country – lacks any feeling for a cosy home; to decorate one's home and to furnish it comfortably, to create a little garden, to set up a bench and a table under the shadow of a tree, does not cross his mind ... But so rough are the walls of his house, so basic the hoarding, so cordial was the reception and the hospitality.’103

‘While we were talking it became time for dinner. A meal of spartan simplicity was served up, consisting of cheese, maize-bread and sour-milk strongly mixed with water. Before, they had allowed themselves as is customary in northern Albania several glasses of brandy, which does not

97 Steinmetz, Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbaniens, 2.
98 Liebert, Aus dem Nordalbanischen Hochgebirge, III.
99 Ibid.
100 Steinmetz, Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbaniens, 17.
101 Liebert, Aus dem Nordalbanischen Hochgebirge, III-IV.
102 Steinmetz, Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbaniens, 7-8.
103 Gerstner, Albanien, 23.
taste at all bad here because it has the advantage of being native. Shortly after the meal we lay
down; for this purpose ferns were spread out over the soil; this is the ordinary bed of the moun-
tainous people. I slept in with the pleasant feeling of having been on the first day of my journey
at the source of the Albanian robber-romantic.’

The Albanian robber-romantic – this is what the travellers from central Europe had been loo-
king for. This had, on the one hand, definitely something to do with Karl May's novel
‘Through the Land of the Shqiptars’, which had nothing in common with Albanian reality –
this provides one basis for the Orientalisation and Balkanisation of the Albanians. On the o-
ther hand, such images found an interested audience in central Europe.

This set of images was preserved through books and publications until World War II. H. A.
Bernatzik’s book with its fantastic photographs represents a considerable contribution to
Orientalisation. This can also be said of many publications of authors from the German ‘Third
Reich’, who became interested in the country as a future part of Germany’s ‘Lebensraum’.
Busch-Zantner, a historian of the Balkans, published a book on Albania in 1939, in which he
does not leave out any of the traditional stereotypes about the country and its inhabitants. Ori-
entalisation is obvious since he compares the country with India (1):

‘... Like India it [Albania – the author] consists of an eternally troubled northern border which
unites the magic of an absorbing mountainous landscape and the vital energy of unattached
mountainous tribes. But like India, it is still covered with the jacket of oriental civilisation, and
like India it came as an Italian protectorate under an endless friendly but noticeable dependency
d of a European great power ... Even the face of the country shows something colonial: The pictu-
re of a coexistence of corrugated iron, iron concrete and already a very elegant civilisation and a
well-balanced oriental spirituality, which harmonises easily with the modesty of popular cultu-
res which have already adopted several technological blessings of Europe, but do not understand
them really and therefore misuse them.’

Interestingly enough, this image of the Albanian from the beginning of the 20th century was
frozen until the end of the century when the country opened again to foreign travellers. In
1985 Walther Peinsipp, who was a German soldier during the World War II in the country,
published a book about the customary laws of northern Albania. In the foreword he uses all
too familiar words:

‘The submitted work tries to give an account of the history as well as the social and customary
order of the Albanians. The older generation is still familiar with it through Karl May's book,
the younger ones are no longer familiar with it. Since the end of World War II silence has hung
over the country, although as descendants of Pelasgian and Illyrian blood, they belong to the
first inhabitants of this part of the world. Apart from the Basques it has remained the only mem-
ber of our cultural area until now in the archaic legal and habitual order of the ancestors ... The
Albanian popular law has kept the archetypes of the human social and habitual order.’

Publications, and there have been a lot over the last decades, have been using these overlap-
ing elements of Balkanisation and Orientalisation over and over again, mixing these frozen

104 Steinmetz, Eine Reise durch die Hochländergaue Oberalbaniens, 6.
105 Bernatzik, Albanien. Das Land der Schkipetaren.
107 Peinsipp, Das Volk der Schkypetaren, 9.
images up with new elements, like the one about 600,000 bunkers which were built in the
time of Enver Hoxha, or standard stories about Albanians being the highest percentage of
Mercedes Benz owners in Europe. This kind of literature does not recognise that a country
which has been almost completely isolated for five decades has been suddenly exposed to the
Western world. The rapidly changing Albanian culture could already be observed in 1993,
when we, a group of Austrian and German historians and ethnologists, conducted fieldwork in
northern Albania.108 Although the population tried its best to present themselves to us in a
traditional way, it was obvious that via mass migration new cultural elements had been intro-
duced by the returnees.

4. Is the Comparison of Cultures politically correct?

When we expose the dominant images of Albania and the Albanian people as a variant of
Orientalism, then, this does not mean that Albanian traditional culture was and is different to
let's say western and central European cultures and easy to observe as such on a pheno-
menological level. This situation clearly invites comparisons. On the other hand, many scholars in
southeastern and eastern Europe refuse this kind of comparison of cultures, since in their view
this would demonstrate that the respective cultures have not been or are not ‘European’ ones
and, therefore, these nations are considered non-European, Asiatic, whatever. Especially when
the focus turns to aspects of social history, like different forms and meaning of family and
kinship in Eastern and Western Europe, the reaction can be vehement.109 This notion of being
considered non-European is very plausible. But when the discussion comes to a point where a
ban is placed on any comparison of cultures, on the ‘othering’ of other cultures, then we have
a serious problem. Werner Schiffauer describes this new moral wave in anthropology / ethno-
logy as ‘fear of the difference’. He states a turning point in the scholarly culture of cultural
anthropology. Comparison of cultures means running into the open knife of being considered
an ’otherer’, one who dichotomises, places ‘us’ in opposition to the ‘other” – the West to the
rest of the world.110

One of the preconditions for the study of differences in various cultures is the non-evaluation
of cultures and of the differences (except when human rights are concerned) – an old Boasian
principle. A second one is that the comparison must not have the function of re-affirming the
self, the culture of the scholarly writer. A third one is the ethic responsibility of the writer for
his or her ’othering’ – and the consequences. Thus we have to come to the conclusion that
comparison of cultures is politically correct, but it has to accept several rules, like the above
mentioned. It goes without saying that the above-cited examples demonstrate a considerable
lack in this ’new morality’ in cultural anthropology. Their images of Albania and the Alban-
ians are basically constructions.

109 See, e.g., the controversy between the author and Jasna Čapo-Zmegan about Croatian and Balkan family
structures. The Croatian ethnologist protest against summarising traditional Croatian family structures un-
110 Schiffauer, Die Angst vor der Differenz, 20-21.
5. Essentialising: Are the Albanians different?

No doubt about it: The Albanians are different. But different to whom, in what time and in what respect? These are important questions that require a differentiated and comprehensive answer. This is not possible here, but a short outline is.

What the above-cited authors mentioned about the Albanian national or traditional culture was wrong insofar as they attributed characteristics to the Albanians as unique to them. The almost only unique element is the Albanian language, but the other elements have been widespread in the western and central Balkans, partly also in the eastern parts. Let us just take the stereotypes for the ‘typical’ Albanian culture, mentioned by these authors: Primitive laws, archaic blood revenge, forgotten lands, primitiveness and pureness of the indigenous people, spartan simplicity yet incomparable hospitality.¹¹¹

The ‘primitive’ laws, conceptualised as customary laws, are not limited to Northern Albania, but were also found among the southern Albanians and in the Balkans generally until at least the beginning of the 20th century, when they contradicted the laws issued by the national parliaments. The phenomenon of customary law is widespread in the Balkans. To relate to it the attributes ‘primitive’ or ‘archaic’ is a result of the widespread assumption that customary laws were orally given unchanged from one generation to the other. As Jack Goody¹¹² has pointed out, orally transmitted customary laws had been much more exposed to change and to pragmatic adaptation than written laws. To discover ‘archaic’ laws or archetypes of a legal order in the Albania at the beginning of the 20th century is obscure.¹¹³

Blood revenge or blood feud is also not a specific feature of Albanian society, but is widespread in the western Balkans.¹¹⁴ Blood feud is a grim element of any legal order, but considered under a modern scholarly perspective this kind of order also includes many positive effects. One has to consider the whole system and how this legal order was considered by the respective communities. It makes, e.g., a difference as to whether blood feud is an individual act or in accordance with the wish of the community. These legal orders in the Balkans, based on customary laws, were not based on the individual but on the community (group, mostly the patrilineally descent group of kin). With this perspective the blood feud obtains a new meaning.

So far as the primitiveness and pureness of the ‘indigenous’ people is concerned, the adjective ‘indigenous’ clearly refers to a primitive and archaic society; which is in an Albanian or western Balkan context pure exoticism. To make it quite clear: At the beginning of the 20th century, the northern Albanian mountainous society was a tribal society with all the ingredients of tribal territory, tribal assembly and tribal head. The Ottoman authorities were not able or did not put very much effort into integrating the tribal territories into the state bureaucracy. But this tribal structure was not a specific feature of Albania. Montenegro and parts of Hercegovina were also characterised by this kind of social organisation. The Montenegrin central authorities, which had been developed out of the Orthodox bishopric in the first half of the 19th century, were successful in integrating the tribes into the emerging state structure in the second

¹¹¹ Concerning the following section, cf. Kaser, Familie und Verwandtschaft auf dem Balkan.
¹¹² Goody, Die Logik der Schrift und die Organisation von Gesellschaft.
¹¹⁴ For Montenegro see Boehm, Blood Revenge.
half of that century. Generally speaking these tribal societies represent a variant of the patrilineally oriented descent group (clan) which was the predominant type of kinship organisation in the western and central Balkans until the beginning of the 20th century. The kinship group consisted of all the descendants of an ancestor who lived a number of generations before. This vertically organised kinship group adapted economically and politically to the various given circumstances. In northern Albania, the ecological structure suggested a territorially fixed kind of organisation, like a tribe, whereas in other regions, as, e.g., in southern Albania or in Serbia, the descent group was distributed over a larger area and a number of villages which they shared with the members of other descent groups.

Spartan simplicity but incomparable hospitality was strikingly apparent to most of the travellers. But again, this was the case in all the Balkan lands and does not represent a specific Albanian characteristic. Travellers from the West were confronted with a hospitality which was for them surprising. They enjoyed it obviously and linked it to spartan simplicity and the archaic, without recognising the concepts of the guest, the friend and the enemy which are widespread in the Balkans. In brief, this arrangement effectively transformed the potential enemy into a friend by granting hospitality to him and at the same time collecting social capital (honour) within the community.

The Orientalising and Balkanising concept of German-speaking writers can be easily deconstructed. They singled out certain seemingly ‘archaic’ phenomena of an already complexly structured Albanian society based on urban culture, a set of links to the Western world etc., and which represents without any doubt a variant of European civilisation. These phenomena were isolated from their general distribution zone and labelled as ‘Albanian’.

When we take this set of the above-discussed phenomena of the western and central Balkans and compare it to central and western European societies, we clearly discover cultural and social differences: The importance of customary law, this kind of kinship organisation, this concept of hospitality and blood feud can be found in remote history but not at the beginning of the 20th century. But these are isolated phenomena which do not represent Balkan societies in their complex reality. Once again, this is how Orientalisation and Balkanisation works.

The 20th century was marked and the 21st century will be marked by the merger of different variants of European cultures into less clearly differentiated ones. The outcome of these melting process is not yet clear by far. What characterised European societies in the 20th century was their path into the specific modernity of industrialised societies. The ways of the Western and Eastern countries were different for almost 50 years, and in the case of the former Soviet Union for about 70 years. The Albanian way into modernity was unique and shaped a society that was cut off from most of its traditions. But at the same time, the isolation of the country has given way to new Orientalistic speculations at the end of the 20th century.

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Albanian Islam – Development and Disruptions

by Rajwantee Lakshman-Lepain

1. Introduction

Islam arrived in Albanian-inhabited areas via Ottoman armies in the 14th century. Although the larger part of the population remained Christian for a long period, by the end of nearly five centuries of Ottoman rule 70% of Albanians had embraced the faith of their conquerors, 20% remained Orthodox Christian and 10% Catholic. Today, the largest Muslim population in the Balkan peninsula is Albanians.

Islam was a difficult legacy to accept. Considered as an alien element to the Albanian culture by the Communist regime (1944-1991), Islam is still despised today by many nationalist Christians and atheist intellectuals. The challenges of modern society cause an identity problem for the whole Albanian Muslim community: Is it possible to be Muslim and European at the same time? What does it mean to be an Albanian Muslim? Does a specific Albanian form of Islam still exist?

This paper will try to throw some light on these questions. It is based on four main ideas which intend to respond to the traditional criticisms raised against the Islamic legacy and religiousness in Albania:

(1) Albanian official historiography is deceptive in its pretence that Albanians are not religious or that Albanians were never good Muslims. In practice, Albanians were always religious although in their own way. Their religion was as sincere and deep-rooted as that of any other people of the Ottoman Empire.

(2) Albanian Islam is specific. It should be judged by internal criteria. It should not be judged on the basis of Turkish or Middle Eastern Islam.

(3) After Islam was introduced in Albania, it was quickly acculturated into specific cultural forms often not compatible with traditional Muslim orthodoxy. In Albania, there was always a tension between ‘official Islam’ and ‘popular Islam’, ‘high Islam’ and ‘low Islam’.

(4) Albanian Islam went through several phases of disruption and reinvention with a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity.


2.1. The Founding Myth of Albanian Historiography

Modern Albanian historiography has two important sources: the thinkers of the ‘renaissance’ (rilindja) period (1844-1912), and the historians of the Communist regime. Neither of them produced an objective and positive image of Islam: the writers of the rilindja because they were at odds with the Ottomans and were trying to promote a form of nationalism transcending all religious divisions in the country; Communist historians for the obvious reason of Marxist materialism. Since the fall of Communism, Albanian historians have not started to

115 These statistics are taken from a census of 1942. For precise figures, see Skendi, Balkan Cultural Studies, 58. No census has been made since that time.
free themselves from their inherited stereotypes. This explains why contemporary history, when it comes to Islam, is still the prisoner of myths.

One of these myths is that Islam is an alien element of Albanian culture imported by the Ottomans. The reason is that Albanians were originally Christian (Saint Paul visited Illyria). Other myths say that they had converted for a number of reasons which had nothing to do with religion. They were opportunists. They wanted to escape the taxes imposed on Christians and to benefit from the many advantages attached to being Muslim in a Muslim society. It is said also that they were forced by the Ottomans to embrace Islam.116 Those who converted are often presented as traitors to the true spirit of the nation.

Another important myth is the weakness of Albanians’ religious feeling. Communists worked hard to show that in their history national feeling was always more important for Albanians than religious feeling. In their propaganda they did not hesitate to distort the ideas of the rilindja writers. As an example they used - out of context - the famous declaration of Pashko Vasa Shkodrani: ‘The religion of the Albanians is Albanianism’117. Actually, he wanted to encourage national unity while still respecting each person’s religious belief.

The true nature of the Islamisation of the Albanians is very different from official historiography. In order to understand Albanian Islam we need to briefly examine the Islamisation process that took place between the 15th and the 19th centuries.

The Islamisation of Albanians was a long process which only began to touch the majority of the population in the 17th century.118 The reasons for the conversion of a majority of Albanians to Islam are numerous and cannot be developed in this paper.119 However, it is important to say that the Ottomans rarely used violence to force their subjects to embrace Islam. The Ottomans did not have an overall policy of Islamisation. Although taxation of non-Muslims existed, it does not fully explain the conversion. First these taxes were paid only by a small fraction of the Christians (those who did not provide troops or perform any military service). Second, the taxes were not particularly heavy, compared to the taxes in Christian dominated territories, and certainly less than the Byzantine taxes. We should also dismiss the idea that Albanians converted for economic reasons. Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs were subject to the same taxes and did not convert. The conversion of Albanians then was most probably linked to their specific cultural identity.

The phenomenon of the Islamisation of the Albanians is related to the unusual situation of the Albanisation of their territory on which still a lot of research remains to be done.120 The official historiography claims that Albanians have always lived in Albania and therefore gives credit to the thesis that they are the descendants of the Illyrians, one of the most ancient peoples of the Balkans spread all over the east Adriatic coast.121 However, non-Albanian researchers consider the question of Illyrian or Thracian origin of the Albanians to be unsolved. Nevertheless, this version of history has influenced many Albanians who think that the de-
scendants of the Illyrians were close to Byzantine rites. Therefore, for them, Christian Orthodoxy should be considered today as the ‘true religion’ of the Albanians. However, we need to consider all aspects of the situation. Linguists have shown that the modern Albanian language does not derive directly from Illyrian but was formed in an area east of Albania at a time when proto-Albanians were in close contact with the proto-Romanians. Later, this population moved westward and established the first Albanian stronghold in a small region covering the south of Montenegro, part of western Kosova/o, and the northern part of the Mirdita region in northern Albania. The fact is well established by local sources which mentioned Albanians for the first time in the 11th century. The first Albanians mentioned in historical sources appear to have been Catholics. How they became Catholics is still unknown, but may be explained by the complex network of religious influences at work in the region. In fact their Catholicism seems to have been fairly recent at the time of their first appearance and was probably rather superficial as we see them easily embracing Orthodox Christianity when coming in contact with the Serbs. This shallow religious identity seems to us one of the main reasons for their conversion to Islam. Slowly the Albanians moved southward, and the process of Albanisation of what became Albanian territory started. At the time the process started, the population of southern Albania was under Slav and Greek influence. A Slavonic language close to Serbian was the most widely-spoken language among other Balkan languages which have left traces only in the toponomy. It is a well established fact that most Albanian toponomy is Slavonic, not Illyrian, although it is quite possible that the Albanian population is descended from Illyrians as well as other Balkan peoples. However, contrary to what official historiography says, this fact does not seem to have played an important role in the religious identity of the Albanians. When they moved south, other populations starting to speak Albanian. It is probable that the Albanisation process was the first step of the Islamisation process, although the religious identity of the Albanian was blurred. Another reason for the Islamisation of the Albanians was probably that the Orthodox Church was organised along nationalist lines (Serbian or Greek) into which the Albanians could not fit. Until the beginning of the 20th century, there was never a national Albanian Orthodox Church, and Albanian Orthodox Christians remained under the influence of the Greeks. They had no access to literature, no schooling in their own language, and almost no local clergy. The few bishops who tried to keep Christian Orthodoxy alive were largely illiterate and represented no match for Muslim propagandists. Islam came not only with all the pomp and apparatus of the state, but also with a superior culture. Becoming a Muslim not only brought material advantages, but even more prestige, access to education and the possibility of being integrated into a global culture in which no distinction of birth or nationality was made. Islamic culture offered, even to Christians, a chance to reach the highest position in the state, especially to Muslims and Muslim converts. A number of sultans had Albanian mothers and there

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124 Ibid. 28, 36.
125 Ibid., 33-34.
were fifteen Albanian Grand vizirs, not to mention governors, Muslim clerics and other officials. Albanian towns under Ottoman administration developed quickly, offering careers to large numbers of people who increasingly converted to Islam. The system of devşirme, a regular levy of young Christian boys brought to Istanbul to be trained to serve the palace or the army, contributed to the Islamisation of Albanians who were very well represented in this practice.

My study of the Muslims of Berat in the 19th century showed that the faith of Albanian Muslims was far from superficial. The religious organisation of Berat followed the same pattern as any small Ottoman city. The large number of mosques and religious schools (medrese) signifies that they were well attended and that the population took an interest in their construction. They were financed by pious foundations (vakıf) proving that the population was generous in giving - not for material reasons but also with clear spiritual intention as is also shown by the testaments and the foundation acts (vakıfname). Religious courts were busy dealing with Muslim legal issues such as marriage, divorce, commercial disputes, etc. Merchants were integrated into Muslim guilds (esnafet) as elsewhere throughout the Empire. They had special links with the clergy as a great part of the foundation money was invested in the bazaar’s shops. The large number of religious and civil servants in the administration of the vakıf, the mosques, the medrese, the shari’a courts and the councils of kaza and vilayets show that Islam was deeply rooted in the society and inspired vocation. Conversions to Islam in towns and villages continued during the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th century. The numerous acts of religious intolerance which have been described at that time are further proof of the vitality of the Albanians’ religious feelings. Therefore, far from confirming the thesis that the religious feeling of the population was weak, the historical documents show a Muslim community actively engaged in the pursuit of its religious aims.

2.2. The Characteristics of Muslim Identity and Albanian Islam

Albanian Muslims were not ‘bad Muslims’, as Communist propaganda would have us to believe, but different Muslims. It is important to understand the part religious affiliation plays in the shaping of Muslim identity because this is why Muslim Kosovars are different from Muslim Albanians. For Kosovars, being Muslim and being Albanian is the same. They have very little experience of religious pluralism compared to Albanians who define Albania (as one often hears) as ‘the land of three religions’. This is a legacy of the spirit of the Ottoman millet system which divided Albanian society into religious communities recognised by the Sultan and governed by their own traditions and spiritual leaders. In Albanian vilayets there were only three millets: Muslim, Christian Orthodox and Catholic. In post-Communist Albania the same three denominations are the only ones represented in the State Department of Religions. Most Albanians think that their experience of multi-communalism is a determining element which differentiates them from their neighbours, the Italians, the Greeks and the Serbs.

126 Lakshman-Lepain, Les sentiment religieux dans la communauté musulmane de Berat, 147-175.
127 vakıf, Turkish, from Arabic waqf: pious foundation, written vakıf in Albanian.
128 A kaza is a subdivision of the vilayet (province). Both terms are Turkish.
129 Lakshman-Lepain, Les sentiment religieux dans la communauté musulmane de Berat, 147-175.
130 Kitsikis, L’Empire Ottoman, 22-24.
Although under Ottoman rule only one Sunni Turkish millet existed in Albania, Islam was by no means monolithic. It was divided between Sunnis in the tradition of the Abu Hanifah School (one of the most tolerant of the four Islamic juridical schools), and Sufi orders that were denied separate recognition. Bektashis together with the Halvetis, Rifa’is, Sa’dis, Gülshenis, Nakshbendis etc. were among the Sufi orders integrated into the Sunni millet which became well represented in Albania. It should be stressed that the most important orders were not Sunni but Shi’a.

The Bektashis became the largest Sufi group in Albania (one fifth of the Muslim population). Although, Bektashism is a type of Sufism, it is not an intellectual type such as the Mevlana or the Nakshbendi. It started as a mixture of shamanism inherited from the Turkoman tribes of Khorassan and of Shi’a theology mixed with popular beliefs in such a way as to appeal to villagers and the lower class of the Anatolian population. When Bektashism established itself in Albania, shamanist influences and pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs were quickly replaced by Albanian popular traditions. Bektashism did not have a well defined theology and could accommodate much local influence. In that way Bektashism became the purest expression of Albanian religiosity and the conservatory of Albanian traditions. In a sense it can be considered as the only truly national religion, and it is no surprise that Bektashis played an important role in the national awaking of Albania in the second half of the 19th century.

This division between Sunni Islam and Sufi or Shi’a Islam is not as fundamental as another type of division between what we call ‘high Islam’ and ‘low Islam’. Sufism can be characterised in Albania as a specific category of low Islam. High Islam was a type of Islam which tried to comply with all the Muslim standards. It was the Islam of the Sunni clergy and was embraced by the elite and the well educated section of the population. The rural population did not have access to high Islam and created its own strain of Islam in which elements of Albanian folk religion were integrated. The identity of ‘low Islam’ is specific. It did not adhere to many Muslim religious duties: prohibition of alcohol was never observed but few Muslims ate pork. Namaz (daily prayer) was ignored and ramadan fasting hardly observed. However, they kept the Qur’an in their house, helped the poor, fasted for the Night of Kadri (natën e Kadri), performed the netët e mira for the dead, organised the mevlud and went on pilgrimage to visit the tombs of Muslim holy men. One can still observe these practices today. The essential problem is that the traditional Albanian world view is hardly compatible with the tenets of orthodox Islam. This will be one of the main challenges of post-Communist Albania.

Many elements of ‘low Islam’ have been explained by foreign observers in terms of the ‘syncretist’ nature of Albanian religiosity (for example the tradition of Albanian Muslims to go to church, or for Christians to visit Muslim holy tombs). ‘Syncretism’ is a misleading concept. Our thesis is that religious identity functions at two levels. One level is the ‘Albanian religion’ and the other level is the specific Muslim or Christian identity. If you ask an Albanian what his religion is, he might answer ‘Muslim’ or ‘Orthodox’ and often he will add ‘but God is

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131 Cf. Clayer, Islam, state and society in post-Communist Albania, 115-138; Kressing in this volume.
132 Melikoff, Hadji Bektach, 55; Clayer, La Bektachiyya, 468; Norris, Islam in the Balkans, 89.
133 Clayer, Bektachisme et nationalisme albanais.
134 Llagami, Për konsolidimin e kulturës Islame, 149.
135 Bartl, Die Albanischen Muslime zur Zeit der nationalen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung, 87-97.
one’ (por Zoti është një). It means that his cultural identity is Muslim, but he is conscious that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God. In fact, this principle goes much further. Not only are Albanian Muslims aware that they believe in the same God, but they share a number of values and traditions which are the basis of their national identity.136 In this way national identity is kept separate from religious identity.137

However, inside Albania, religious identity functions much like a national identity. Muslim Albanians have a distinct identity from Christians and in some ways a distinct culture. This is why, after the fall of the Communist regime, Albanian Muslim intellectuals established an association called Kultura Islame imitated by Catholic intellectuals who created the association Kultura Katolik. They have distinct values, and different attitudes which colour their political positions. Very few Albanians would recognise that there is such a strong division in their society because the myth of national unity is very powerful. This religious division is often hidden by other divisions such as the division between the north (supposed to be under Muslim and Catholic influence) and the south (supposed to be under Christian Orthodox influence), or the distinction drawn between cultured people (njeri me kultur) and uncultured people (njeri pa kultur).138

However, the fact that religious identity and national identity have been kept separate explains why Albanian Muslims have never felt part of the umma, i.e., the Muslim transnational community of believers. For Muslims, religious identity supersedes national identity. Muslims are supposed to be proud of the achievements of other Muslim countries. An attack against any part of the umma is an attack against all Muslims of the world. This concept of umma is a form of internationalism which explains why Egyptian, Syrian, or Algerian Muslims are ready to take part in a jihad in Bosnia, Afghanistan or Chechnia. Albanian Islam does not know the concept of umma. An Albanian Muslim feels more solidarity with an Albanian Catholic than with a Bulgarian Muslim or Egyptian Muslim. This explains why Albanians felt so little concern about what happened in Bosnia.

3. From the Sunni Millet to the Birth of an Albanian National Islam: The avatars of Albanian Islam

In 1913 for the first time in its history Albania became an independent state. However, five hundred years of Ottoman rule could not be wiped out easily. The Ottoman legacy in Albania was deeply rooted in culture, languages (Turkish Osmanlı, Persian, Arabic), tradition, religion etc. Suddenly this heritage was put into question. Should Turko-Islamic culture be rejected together with Ottoman rule? The shock of independence created a tremendous impact on Albanian Islam which had to redefine itself.

136 Lakshman-Lepain, Pluralizëm dhe tolerantë fetare në Shqipëri, 38-56.
137 Another remark should be made on the religious identity of the Albanians. When the Communist regime collapsed in 1991, Albania experienced an extraordinary religious outburst. Many Albanians converted to the fast-growing religious movements newly (re-)introduced in the country such the Evangelicals. When questioned on their religious identity, Albanians usually make a distinction between their original faith or traditional cultural religion (fe in Albanian corresponding to one of the three recognised millet in Ottoman Albania) and their true belief. For example, an Albanian can declare that his religion (fe) is Muslim while his besim fetar (religious belief) is Protestant. It means that in Albania one’s cultural identity is different from one’s religious identity.
138 De Rapper, non published thesis on the Devoll area.
It would be wrong to think that all Albanians were united in their fight against Ottoman rule. A large part of the population was pro-Turkish. Even after 1912, there were several strong turcophile movements such as the one led by Zahri Basri Bey Dukagjini who wanted Albania to remain linked to the Sultan. In 1914, villagers in central Albania tried to remove from power the German Protestant Prince William von Wied and to replace him with an Ottoman Prince. Until 1917, at least, according to reports of the Austrian military troops in northern Albania, the Sultan’s name was mentioned as the ruler of Albanian Muslims each Friday during prayer meetings in mosques. The Austrians had to explain to the Muslims that such traditions had to be removed since Albania was an independent country. Contrary to the opinion of nation-state oriented Albanian historians, the nationalist ideas developed by a minority of Albanian emigre intellectuals during the second part of the 19th century had a limited impact on Albanian society, due mostly to the population’s lack of education. Many of these intellectuals, including Qemal Stafa (who is generally regarded as the ‘father of the Albanian nation’), would have been satisfied with an autonomous unified Albania under Ottoman suzerainty.

Albanians were forced into independence by external factors and were ill-prepared for their new-found liberty. They had to invent themselves as a nation. The invention of the Albanian nation deeply shook Islam, forcing it to redefine itself. In 1922, Orthodox Christian Albanians created their own autocephalous church. This event had a tremendous impact on all other religious denominations. Orthodox autocephaly, organised through congresses with statutes and by-laws would give to other religious denominations a pattern to be imitated. It was such a powerful pattern that it would be used again after the fall of Communism.

From the end of the 1920s, reformers took the leadership of the Albanian Muslim community. In 1921, a ‘national Muslim Albanian Alliance’ was created. The organisation proclaimed the separation of the Albanian Muslim community from the Sheh-ul-Islam in Istanbul. However, only in 1923 were the links with the Califat officially severed. Albanian Muslims organised their first congress in the same year. The Mufti of Tirana was chosen as the Great Mufti or General Mufti, the leader of the whole Muslim community. In the statutes of the Muslim community of 1925, the Great Mufti was also the chairman of the High Council of shari’a.

Bektashis and other Sufi orders followed the same pattern. Following the ban on Sufi orders by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, Bektashis (about 200,000 in Albania at that time) proclaimed spiritual independence. It was only in 1945 that they would reject the Sunni authority. The other Sufi orders were organised in two independent organisations which merged later: Drita Hyjnore with the Qadiris, Rifa’is, Sad’is and Tijanis, and Kryesia e Sekteve Aleviane with the Halvetis, Jelvetis and Gülshenis.
Vehbi Dibra was the first Great Mufti of the Albanian Muslim community.\(^{147}\) He was part of the group of Muslim reformers opposed to the conservative Muslims of Shkodra.\(^{148}\) Consequently, polygamy was forbidden among Muslims, participation of women in social life was encouraged, the veil was abolished and in 1937 officially banned at King Zog’s initiative. It was decided that Albanian would become the official language of the Muslims, including the reading of \textit{Qur’an} and the ritual prayer (probably a heresy for any Muslim in the world). Vehbi organised the first Muslim publication of the Albanian Sunni Islam, \textit{Zani i Naltë} (1923-1939) which was published under the name \textit{Kultura Islame} from 1939 until 1946. Patriotism and modernism were the two key words of the reformers’ programme presented in this magazine.\(^{149}\) Religion had to be nationalistic. The purpose of any religious institution was to serve the state and the nation. This definition of religion is still widely accepted by Albanians today. It was, however, under King Zog (1928-1939) that the process of transformation of the \textit{millets} into ‘national churches’ reached its climax. From the early 1920’s onwards, Ahmet Zog (who was very much influenced by Kemal Mustafa Atatürk) developed a policy that aimed to put each religious community under the strict control of the state.\(^{150}\) According to a royal decree of July 16th, 1924, all religions had to write official statutes and by-laws in order to be registered by the state. They were forbidden to take part in political activities. The state maintained the right to appoint and dismiss their leaders and to control their finances.\(^{151}\)

On April 1\(^{st}\), 1928 a civil code modelled on western European countries was adopted. It was the end of the \textit{shari’a} courts and their \textit{kadis}, but Egyptian laws on \textit{vakif} persisted. A new constitution was also proclaimed based on four main principles: (1) laity of the state (there should be no official religion), (2) religious freedom, (3) equality among religions, (4) three national ‘churches‘ (Islam, Christian Orthodoxy and Catholicism) independent from the state but under its control. With the exception of the last principle, the first Albanian post-Communist constitution (presented by the Socialist government) would renew these pre-war traditions.\(^{152}\) Again, after the fall of the Communist regime, only these three religions would be allowed to have representatives within the State Department of Religions.

In August 1929, the Sunni Muslim community adopted new by-laws to comply with new State regulation. All medrese and seminaries were replaced by one single training institution based in Tirana. A centralised administration of the \textit{vakif} was put in place and the number of mosques open to the public was decreased: 1,048 active mosques and 1,315 religious clerics were allowed.\(^{153}\) During their second congress held the same year, it was decided to create the ‘High Council of the Community’ (\textit{Këshilli i Lartë i Bashkësisë}) headed by a college of four muftis (from Shkodra, Tirana, Korça and Gjirokastra) and the Great Mufti.\(^{154}\) Their appointment had to be ratified by the King. The new by-laws specifically proclaimed that the com-

\(^{147}\) Zekaj, \textit{Zhvillimi i Kulturës Islamë të Shqiptarët gjatë shekullit XX}, 41.
\(^{149}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{150}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 30-31.
\(^{152}\) The recognition of religious movements of Albania is still in debate today. Officially article 10, paragraph 6 of the Albanian Constitution recognises ‘the religious communities of the country’ as ‘legal corporations’. However the identity of these ‘communities’ is not made precise.
\(^{154}\) Ibid., 21.
The establishment of Communist rule in Albania – one of the strictest in the world - was followed by a systematic dismantling of all institutions linked to the previous regime. The atheistic policy of the dictator Enver Hoxha started immediately after he came to power in 1944. The eradication of religions was carried out gradually. Fierce attacks were launched against religious institutions which were all closed down. These attacks were followed by a systematic elimination of the clergy of each religious community. Hojas, babas, sheiks, dervishes, Catholic and Orthodox priests were put on trial under accusations of collaboration with the Fascists during the war, of spying activities and treason. Many of them were executed, or sent to prisons and labour camps. The Muslim community, as the largest religious community in the country, suffered greatly from the loss of almost all its elite. Medreses were one of the first targets as they represented the future of Islam in Albania. The medrese of Shkodra, the second largest in the country, was closed in 1947. Communists tried to stage a popular protest against the central medrese of Tirana, pretending that the students themselves asked for it to be closed. However, after the strong reaction of the students it was allowed to continue its activities under strict Communist supervision. Finally, in 1956 many members of the staff of the medrese of Tirana were arrested including the director, Ismet Dibra; the vice-director Jonuz Bulej, and Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu. The ten-year curriculum was reduced to four years and religious teaching was progressively replaced by lectures on history, literature and biology - all mixed with Marxist ideology. Anti-religious propaganda was intensified via schools, radio programmes, theatres, films, newspaper articles and books. Party officials and civil servants were asked to check that no-one would fast or perform any rituals during religious holy days and that engagements and weddings would not include any religious ceremony.

In 1967, following the example of China, Albania launched its ‘Cultural Revolution’. In his speech on February 6th, 1967 Enver Hoxha declared war against all established religions. Religion was officially banned from social life and Albania was proclaimed the ‘first atheistic state of the world’. Even speaking about religion in the privacy of one’s home became a criminal offence and children were duty-bound to denounce their parents. The few religious institutions still functioning were definitively closed. Religious properties were confiscated, tombs were desecrated, archives were burned along with precious manuscripts and works of art. Hundreds of mosques, churches and tekkes were destroyed or transformed into museums, coffee shops, warehouses, sports halls etc. According to official Communist statistics, in just a

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155 Rocco, Kombësia dhe feja në Shqipëri, 33.
156 Mucej, Komunizmi dhe raprezaljet e tij kundër besimëve fetare në Shqipëri gjatë periudhës 1944-1990, 75. In 1945 the Albanian Sunni community had 1,127 mosques, 17 schools-medrese and 1,306 hojas. The dervish orders registered 206 tekkes with 65 babas, 128 sheiks and 468 dervishes, Dizdari/Kasollja, Persekutimit i klerit musliman në Shqipëri, 1-2.
157 Mucej, ibid., 158 Ibid., 76.
159 Kuçuku/Gjuxhi, Ateizmi dhe feja në Shqipërinë postkomuniste, 55.
few months, 2,169 places of worship were closed down. All clerics who were still free were 
arrested and sent to jail or to labour camps. In the city of Shkodra, which had an important 
Muslim population, 34 out of 36 mosques were destroyed.

On November 22nd, 1967 the Official Gazette published decree no. 4337 cancelling all previ-
ous agreements or legal documents granted to religious organisations and declared them offi-
cially banned. To perform any religious ritual became a criminal offence. In 1975, decree no. 
5339 published in the Official Gazette prohibited the use of all religious names. The ban on 
religion was made part of the new constitution of 1976 (articles 37 and 55). The penal code 
included new provisions for those infringing these laws. 160

When Enver Hoxha died in 1985 he was replaced by Ramiz Alia. However, there was no sign 
of a change of policy in the first years of Alia’s control. The Communist regime experienced 
tremendous economic difficulties due to a lack of investment and the total isolation under 
which the country had been living for the previous twenty years. In 1987 Alia tried to estab-
lish the first contacts with the West. The late prime minister of the federal German state of 
Bavaria, Franz-Joseph Strauß, was the first Western political leader to visit the country. As a 
gesture of good-will, Ramiz Alia freed five priests on the occasion. In 1988/1989, the head of 
the Albanian Muslim community of the United States was allowed to enter Albania together 
with several Albanian Catholics and Mother Theresa. 161

More signs of change came in 1990 when it was already obvious to foreign observers that the 
days of the Communist regime were numbered. The government tried timid liberalisation. On 
May 8th, the parliament reduced the number of offences punishable by the death penalty in-
cluding a number of religious offences, and religious propaganda was allowed. On November 
16th, 1990 the first mosque, the famous Xhamija e Plumbit, was reopened in Shkodra. 162

5. Revival of Islam in Post-Communist Albania: The Reinvention of Tradition

5.1. The Challenges faced by the Albanian Muslims

In 1991, after the collapse of the Communist regime, one of the main changes Albania faced 
was the spectacular return of religion. Many religious movements poured into the country, 
attracted by the potential for mass conversion. In this period of transition, Islam, more than 
any other religion saw its foundations seriously shaken.

Fifty years of Communism had produced generations of Marxists, if not atheists, who could 
legitimely ask: Why should we have a religion? In particular: Why Islam, when for years the 
Party (dominated by Orthodox Tosks) had condemned Islam as a symbol of backwardness 
and a faith that Albanians had embraced only through oppression or for opportunist reasons? 
Why revive a community which had come out of the Communist era exhausted and appar-
ently deprived of any inspiration?

Very few Muslims with the knowledge of Muslim theology had survived. Books, teaching 
materials, even copies of the Qur’an in Albanian language were rare. Money was scarce. A 
large part of the community properties which had been confiscated (shops, vakf, land) were

160 Ramet, Nihil Obstat, 217.
161 Clayer, Islam, State and society in post-Communist Albania, 120.
162 Trix, The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania, 533-549.
not returned. However, a greater loss is the rich fabric of religious tradition - whether literary (nefes\textsuperscript{163}, betejinte etc.), cultural or ritual - that had nurtured believers in the past.

Albanian Muslims were confronted with a dilemma. Pre-war Islam was dead. What would replace it? A new version of Albanian national Islam, or a version of Islam imported from Turkey or the Middle East?

5.2. Some Responses to the Challenges

The ‘Organisation of the Muslim Community of Albania’ (Organizimi i Komunitetit Mysliman të Shqipërisë, also known as the ‘Islamic Community of Albania’ - Bashkësia Islamike e Shqipërisë) was formed on January 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 1991. It is important to notice just as in the first years of the new Albanian nation, the organisation defined its jurisdiction as covering all Muslims of Albania, including the Shi’a Muslim orders such as the Bektashis and the ‘Alevian sects’. The organisation is headed by a ‘General Islamic Council of Albania’ (Këshilli i Përgjithëm Islamik i Shqipërisë) of 65 people representative of all regions of Albania, elected every five years and meeting once a year. The General Council chooses an executive board of 11 people plus two advisors. Another board of directors consists of the sectors of education, culture, finance, vakf and staff. At the municipality level there are mufti local councils.\textsuperscript{164} The community functions according to statutes approved by the General Council (we were denied access to the document). The Muslim authorities have chosen to be organised as an association, a new tradition if we consider the community’s infrastructures after 1912: There is no more High Court or High Council of shari’a. The Muslim community has kept the same periodical that they used to have before the Communist regime, Drita Islame.

The present chairman of the Muslim Community is Hafiz Sabri Koçi. Imam and mufti in Shkodra before Communist times, he spent 21 years in prison and after his release worked as a hydraulic welder until 1990. However, most of the staff of the Sunni Muslim administration are laymen who have professional activities outside the community. Many of them are ex-Communists. Although many are sincerely involved in the organisation, according to our observation and the comments we heard from Arab Muslim missionaries, many are simply motivated by more worldly reasons: large salaries paid by Arab countries and many business opportunities with foreign investors.

Saudi Arabia was one of the first donors and remains the one with the most influence in the organisation. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia financed the first translation of the Qur’an and provided funding for the printing of one million copies in order to provide every Albanian family with a copy. Very few Albanians took the trouble to read the book, but many of these copies of the Qur’an found their ways in taxis and public buses as a protection against road accidents. This indicates that a large section of the population is attached to its Muslim roots. Saudis also provided funding for the building of hundreds of mosques. Soon Libya entered the competition and pledged to build several thousand mosques. It seems that the programme was only implemented partially. Mosques under construction quickly became a familiar feature of Albanian villages.

\textsuperscript{163} Nefes, Turkish: religious song or poem.
\textsuperscript{164} 75 Vjetori i Mëvehtësisë së Komunitetit Mysliman të Shqipërisë, Tirana 1998.
The problem of building mosques was easier to solve than the problem of providing imams for them. In practice most village mosques were left in the custody of a caretaker without an imam. Educating hojas was a process that necessarily took time. With foreign aid, ten madrese located in Tirana, Shkodra, Durrës, Kavaja, Elbasan, Berat, Peshkopi, Kukës, Korça and Gjirokastra were organised with more than 1,500 students. 165 In these schools many Arab instructors teach Arabic, the Qur’an, ‘religious culture’, ‘doctrines’ (a-kaid), the history of Islam and hadith. 166 Every year, hundreds of young Albanians are sent to study in Islamic countries. Elira Cela listed 110 sent to Turkey, 56 to Malaysia, 3 to Libya and 2 to Egypt in 1995. 167

The organisation of the Muslim Community had very few ideological concepts to present to the new generation on the definition of a post-Communist Albanian Islam. A group of Albanian Muslim intellectuals who created, in 1991, an organisation called Kultura Islame took the initiative. Most of the members were ex-Communists. Soon they were in competition with the Islamic Community. Because the organisation Kultura Islame was made of people close to the Democratic Party (of ex-president Berisha) and with a long experience of ideological battles, it acquired a semi-official status. A major figure was the head of the Secret Service, Bashkim Gazidede, a strong Muslim who is said to have been the head of the Kultura Islame Association and who had a close relationship with a number of foreign Muslim countries. 168

At one point, when the Democratic Party became concerned about the activities of Arab fundamentalists in the country, it was the association of Muslim intellectuals that offered to take Malaysian Islam as a model and encouraged President Berisha to visit Malaysia and sign important cultural and economic agreements with that country. In December 1994 they organised an international seminar on the ‘Role of the Muslim faith in post-communist Albanian society’ together with the Academy of Islamic Sciences from Malaysia, the Institute for Political Research of Malaysia and the Albano-Malaysian Association for Friendship.

Albanian intellectuals blamed the Islamic Community for a number of weaknesses in the revival of Islam in Albania: Albanians practice only the very basic rituals of Islam and were not well prepared to fight ideologically with the West. They judged that the poorly educated zealots coming from distant Muslim countries, such as Yemen or Sudan, were ill equipped to speak to the Albanian youth or to teach them a progressive Islam. They dismissed the Albanian clergy for having no sound knowledge of theology.

Albanian Muslim intellectuals saw their main duty as rejecting the attacks of other intellectuals such as Ismail Kadarë who considers Islam an archaic religion and a legacy of Turkish domination to be rejected if Albania wants to join Europe. 169 The new ideology can be found in the proceedings of international seminars and in the publications of Hysen Çobani, 170 the influential chairman of the Association of Muslim Intellectuals. Whereas the inspiration of the Islamic Community often came from abroad, the Muslim intellectuals tried to find models in

165 Zekaj, Zhvillimi i Kulturës Islamë të Shqiptarët gjatë shekullit XX, 113.
166 Ibid., 115.
167 Cela, Albanian Muslims, human rights, and relations with the Islamic World, 139-152.
168 Avvenimenti, Shiku në Shqipëri; Drenova, Portreti i paautorizuar i një spiuni fanatik, 6-8.
169 Kasollija, Rekomandim për Kadarenë.
170 Refleksion ne Islam, as well as many articles published in both the newspaper of the Islamic Community, Drita Islame, and in that of the Democratic Party, Rilindja Demokratike.
some of the Muslim thinkers of the ‘renaissance’ such as the Frashëri brothers. That led them to promote a nationalistic type of Islam which is characterised by the following ideas:

- ‘Islam is one of the fundamental components of Albanian nationalism’

- Islam should be used against all remnants of Socialism and Communism which still pollute the mind of the Albanians. It is ‘an important ally of democracy in post-Communist Albania’ (i.e. the Democratic Party)

- Islamic solidarity should be developed with external Muslim communities in the world, especially with Muslims of Kosova/o and Macedonia which are part of the original ‘ethnic Albania’.

- Islam is the basis of moral values focused on family and nation. It must be defined in the framework of European culture.

- Islam is not in contradiction with modernity.

- Albanian Islam has its own traditions and should not imitate Muslims from the East. It is a way to keep Albanian traditions alive.

5.3. The Sufi Orders in the post-Communist World

Sufi orders are composed in Albania of the Bektashi community which is organised independently from the ‘Alevian Sects’: Halvetis, Rifa’is, Qadiris, Sa’adis, Gïlshenis, Hayatis and Jelvetis. After the fall of communism, the Sufi orders were in a worse position compared to the Sunni Muslim community. Because Sufis were considered to be second-class Muslims before 1945 and had very little support abroad, Communist persecution almost wiped them out. Furthermore because their doctrine was a well-kept secret, it could be more easily destroyed. The Sufi orders have lost not only their material properties like other Muslims, but their oral tradition and their secrets (which were previously passed only in initiation ceremonies). It is our opinion, after discussion with a number of masters (babas) that most of the doctrines of these orders have been lost and will never be revived. Bektashis and Alevian orders had once again to re-invent themselves. Two options were available to avoid being assimilated by the Sunnis: introducing new traditions to mix with what remains from the past, or borrow components from other kind of Sufism like Iranian Shi’ism. Both organisations tried to compromise between the two options. We will consider here only the case of the Bektashis.

During the Communist period, a Bektashi baba named Baba Rexhebi escaped to the United States where he founded a teqe (centre) in Detroit. He came in contact with more sophisticated types of Sufism and read the works of Western Orientalists, specifically the French Orientalist Henri Corbin, in English, and understood that to survive Bektashism would need to go through a drastic reaggiornamento. He wrote a book on ‘Bektashism and Muslim Mysticism’ in which he tried to put Bektashism in the perspective of Muslim mysticism and relate it to other more elaborate forms of Sufism. In particular he demonstrated that Bektashism is closely related to Persian Shi’ism, and he tried to dismiss the pagan influence to bring Bek-

171 Çobani/Ndroqi, Besimi mysliman ështe pjese integrale e nacionalizmit shqiptar, 45.
172 Ibid., 34–46.
173 Cf. Kressing in this volume.
174 Cf. Rexhebi, Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma.
tashism back onto the path of Shi’a orthodoxy. As this book is the only one of its kind available in the Albanian language, his work had a tremendous influence on Bektashis and has become a vademecum, although the doctrines found in it differ greatly from the old traditions. More important, his book opened the door to Iranian influence.

Although Bektashis are not orthodox Shi’a, Iran was active in supporting them. Bektashis in Albania were poor and had only a few baba left. The leader of the Bektashis, Reshat Bardhi, was an old man with little education. Iranians seized the opportunity to bring them back to the orthodox Shi’a flock. More than fifteen dervishes went to Iran to study at the Theological Faculty of Qom. It is probable that when they return to Albania they will be much closer to Iranian Shi’ism than Bektashism ever was.

Bektashis also tried to redefine themselves politically in the limited space left to them by the Sunnis. Their main aspiration is to be recognised as ‘the fourth religion’ in Albania, i.e., as a traditional religion with official status in the State. For this purpose they developed a close relationship with President Berisha (1992-1997), taking part in his political campaigns. The political changes of 1997 have made their policy counter-productive. The new Socialist government, which had an anti-Muslim policy, has at best ignored them and as a result they have been marginalised. The future of the movement is very uncertain due to the weakness of the head of the Bektashi movement: the Kryegjysh lacks the vision necessary for the movement’s survival. Either it will be taken over by the Iranians or it will slowly die.


6.1. Strategies of Foreign Muslim Organisations

The Islamisation process with the creation of what we can call an ‘institutionalised Islam’ could only be a slow process. A lot of Eastern Muslim Organisations saw Albania as a land of opportunity and started to pour missionaries into the country. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them came from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, the Gulf Emirates, Algeria and also Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey. Others came for more political reasons such as the Palestinians and the Bosnians. Each group had its own strategies, means and goals. Arabs, Iranians and indirectly Turks were the most active and came with impressive budget.

Broadly speaking, the Muslim organisations operating in Albania are of two types: those which are just an extension of the political ambition of their home country and those which are not linked to any government but came largely to promote a brand of Islam linked to the extreme wing of an Islamist government.

Arabs have created a council in charge of co-ordinating relief works and propaganda actions. Thirteen organisations are members of that council, all of them Arab. The council is believed to be under the influence of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries which are trying to counter the influence of more radical organisations linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. A good example of a country trying to use the re-Islamisation process to promote its own political and diplomatic objectives is Iran. Iranians have created a foundation called Foundation Saadi Shirazi. Officially the foundation’s purpose is to promote Persian culture and Islamic values. In practice, the foundation is part of the Iranian Embassy and is believed to be a cover
for the Iranian secret services. The budget of the foundation is estimated at three million dol-

lars. Part of this money is distributed to a large number of Albanian intellectuals who work on

the foundation’s magazine Perla and the newspaper Gjylistani. Seminars are organised with

the participation of the Albanian Academy of Sciences. Translation are ordered and books are

written with a single aim: linking Islamic culture to Iran.

Culture was clearly one of the main directions of the foreign Muslim organisations’ strategy.

Every year hundreds of young Albanians are assigned to study sciences in Turkey, Malaysia,

Saudi Arabia, and Iran. In return, these students are expected to adopt and bring back to Alba-
nia the Islamic and cultural values of the countries they visited. The men must grow beards

and girls must wear the Islamic scarf. The Iranians are obviously not the only one to apply

this cultural strategy. Under the pretext of reviving ‘the great Islamic culture that Albania has

inherited’, Arabs and Iranians finance all sorts of historical and sociological research aimed at
demonstrating that Albania is part of the Islamic world.175 They paid many Albanian intellectu-
tuals to trace all manuscripts and publications written in Arabic or Persian that can be found
in Albanian libraries. They revive the works of Albanian Muslim poets, clerics, and Muslim
Albanian nationalists which have been discarded under the Communists. In a way, this policy
helps to revive the Ottoman and Oriental legacy of Albanians.

Another direction of the foreign Muslim organisations’ strategy is social relief. Social actions
depend on a large number of humanitarian organisations and Islamic foundations. We counted
about thirty organisations at work in the country. Most of them are Arab and mixed charitable
actions, economic activities with open proselytism. Their aim is to show the Albanians that
there is material advantage to being Muslim. These organisations had substantial budgets and
can spend money to make Islam attractive to the needy. A lot of charitable work is done to
feed and clothe the poor. Charity, an instrument of proselytising, is often used to put pressure
on the population. For example, poor Albanian families can receive money to send their chil-
dren to the Qur’anic school or for their daughter to wear the veil. Financial incentives are
given to butchers who will sell meat of animals ritually slaughtered (halal) and to advertise it.
Some aid organisations have given the priority to the foundation of the ‘Islamic family’. Some
Arab missionaries, often already married in their country, take an Albanian wife with the pur-
pose of founding a Muslim family which will become an example to others. They use Alba-
nian intermediaries to find the girls, usually young village girls, and pay financial compensa-
tion to the family. The compensation might be enough to pay for the financing of a small
shop.

Aid is also provided on a larger scale. In 1996, Muslim organisations gave a total of $ 2.2
million to an Albanian state agency to cater for 5,000 orphans on the condition that they re-
cieve a strict Muslim education. From previous research that we conducted in Albania be-
tween 1997 and 1999, we found that thirteen organisation members of the Co-ordination
Council of Islamic Foundations had an annual budget in 1996 of $ 27.2 million. Out of that
budget, $ 13.3 million was spent on construction, 2.6 million on education, 2.5 million on
health programmes, and 2.5 million on other social activities. In relation to the scale of the

175 Jehona, Materializëm apo, 1.
Albanian economy, this is a huge amount of money. It is between 2 and 3% of the annual GDP and represents more than a quarter of foreign investment. The total amount of money spent by Muslim organisations could be well over 5% of GDP. We estimated the total amount of aid, direct and indirect, coming from Muslim countries to be at least $50 million, or half of foreign investment in the country. This does not include the investment of the Albanian-Arab Islamic Bank and other purely business investments.

To add to their economic and political weight, some Muslim countries signed trade and finance agreements with Berisha’s government. This is the case for Malaysia which was chosen to give a more modern image of Islam and which opened a bank. Companies based in Bahrain created the Albanian-Arab Islamic Bank. Iranians founded AlbIran, a company to promote Iranian investments and technical co-operation. Many Muslim organisations gained business opportunities as a result of the re-Islamisation strategy.

6.2. The Impact of Foreign Muslims on Albanian Islam

The problem of re-Islamisation by foreign organisations is that it tends to replace traditional Albanian Islam with something completely alien. Albanian Islam is not ritualistic. It is not concerned with theological problems. Albanian Islam is tolerant and pro-Western. While Albanian traditional Muslim identity is based on clannish solidarity and a cultural practices, foreign Muslim missionaries try to introduce a ritualistic conception of religion. They insist on the observance of Muslim rituals, especially prayers and fasting, that were never part of popular Albanian Islam. The same is true for the prohibition of alcohol (which is a serious problem for Albanians accustomed to drink rakı) and the consumption of halal meat. Foreign Muslims attach a lot of importance to social appearance. They encourage young male and female Albanians to follow the dress codes of more conservative Muslim countries. The intrusion into private life is much resented by Albanians, and has limited the process of re-Islamisation.

Furthermore, foreign Muslim countries expect Albanian Muslims to give solidarity with the umma rather than to the Albanian nation. As an example one can refer to a recent book written by an Arab Muslim, Abdull-lah Nasih Ulvan on Vëllazëria Islame (Islamic Fraternity) which intends to propagate such a philosophy. Arab Muslims import a version of Islam which counters Westernisation and is in conflict with the European aspiration of most Albanians. Many Albanians would like to define themselves as ‘European Muslims’, not as an Eastern minority living in Europe. They see their future in an integration with Europe, not the Middle East.

Foreign Muslim missionaries do not have this view of the future of the Albanian Muslim community. They intend to promote new Islamic values in the country and they distribute a number of publications all over Albania for this purpose such as Jehona, a new monthly socio-cultural magazine, and Qyteterimi Islam (Islamic Civilisation), a news bulletin published by the new Albanian Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation. These materials are presented as being an initiative of Albanians but the Arab influence behind them is clear. They focus only on Islamic topics and are of poor intellectual level. The foundation of an In-

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stitute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation is alien to Albanian culture but typical of Arab countries which have a long Islamic intellectual tradition including debating obscure points of Islamic ‘theology’. Very little information is circulated on the people who run the Albanian Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation but some of their publications indicate their aims.

In 1997, the Albanian Institute published a book on ‘The development of Islamic culture among Albanians during the 20th century (Zhvillimi i Kulturës Islame të Shqiptarët gjatë shekullit XX). This book intends to show the importance of the Islamic cultural heritage of Albania: the author revives forgotten Albanian Muslim writers and gives a brief survey of the historical development of Islam in Albania. However, it is rather superficial and the main purpose of the book is ideological. It is aimed at showing that nationalism and Islam go together and therefore Albanian Muslims claim a ‘Great Albania’ with parts of Kosova/o and Macedonia which were not included within the Albanian borders of 1913. According to the authors, Muslims of Albania, Kosova/o and Macedonia share a common Islamic legacy and are part of the umma. However the reality is different: Albanian Muslims do not have a common religious identity with believers of these countries.

Another field where foreign Muslim countries are eager to import their new values is among women. There are many examples of zealous activities in this regard. On the day of the commemoration of the birth of Fatima the Iranian Foundation Saadi Shirazi published a pamphlet on successful Iranian women wearing the chador. The purpose was to show that Iranian women are integrated in modern life and hold important functions while at the same time they respect the religious laws applied to their sex. Another Iranian publication circulating in Albania deserves attention: it is a ‘National Plan of Action for Women’ prepared by people close to the office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The chapter ‘Law and Family’ suggests that the Civil Code be revised and new laws dealing with women’s issues be adopted in order to ‘propagate a correct and balanced view regarding women according to Islamic principles’. Recently the Albanian Muslim Association Horizonti dhe Kultura published a similar booklet (but under Arab influence) on Gruaja Muslimane dhe detyrimet e saj (A Muslim Woman and her Duties). Another interesting example is the information bulletin Qyteterimi Islam (‘Islamic Civilisation) which, in 1998, presents the pictures of five Albanian girls who graduated after four years in the University of Yarmuk (Jordan) in Islamic law. Each has her hair and body covered and is wearing strict Islamic attire.178

6.3. The Re-Islamisation Process and the Albanian Population

What are the results of nine years of re-Islamisation? One cannot say that the religious scene of Albania has drastically changed. On the contrary, what really strikes the observer is that after fifty years of Communism, Albanians have returned so easily to their traditions. Some religious celebrations are becoming festive occasions for the Albanian family. No Muslim family would miss the bajram meal or fail to sacrifice a lamb. This habit is very similar to the way people in the West celebrate Christmas. Mosques are often empty, but the shrines of

177 National Plan of Action, 19.
Muslim saints (türbe) are much frequented. Not only are they well attended, but if we judge by the ex voto on their walls (a Christian custom adopted by Moslems), they perform miracles as never before. This indicates that people believe in these miracles. In rural areas traditional Islam is thriving but has nothing to do with the re-Islamisation process. From many visits we made to villages in all areas of Albania in the past years, we found that Arab missionaries are not popular in villages. Albanians judge them as backward and look down on them. In general, Albanians are extremely prejudiced against people from the Middle East and do their best to dissociate themselves from them in the presence of Europeans. In the cities, things are different. Foreign Muslim missionaries appear to be more successful in their proselytisation work among young people with no religious background than among villagers. It is not uncommon in Tirana to see a group of Albanians wearing the Muslim hejab. Muslim propagandists have succeeded in creating a nucleus of Albanian Muslims sharing their strict view of Islam. They have also succeeded in rallying a number of intellectuals, especially of the older generation. Surprisingly, they are more successful in recruiting members of the former Communist Party than independent intellectuals. Those who had put their faith in Communism felt a great vacuum when the ideology was discredited. They were apparently more open to look for another ideology to replace the old one.

6.4. Islam and Politics

The re-Islamisation of Albania took place on a large scale after the fall of the Communist regime, due very much to the fact that Islam entered the Albanian political sphere. With the establishment of democracy, Albanian political life was divided between two main political forces: the Democratic Party of the northern Muslim ex-president, Sali Berisha, and the Socialist Party of the southern Christian Orthodox, Fatos Nano. Both, when in office, were accused by the opposition of promoting the interests of their own ethno-religious clans. Each political party’s choice of identity was supposed to be the nation’s choice. That is why the foreign policy of each of them became a matter of hard political debate. When Sali Berisha came to power (1992-1997) he filled all important positions with people affiliated with his northern Muslim clans or with his Party. He opened the country to Westerners, especially Americans, and aimed at a quick integration of his country into the European Union (EU). At the same time as the autocratic and violent nature of his power was being progressively discovered by Westerners, he counterbalanced Western influence by offering enticements to foreign Muslim countries. These countries were eagerly waiting at the entrance expecting to influence the large majority of Albanian Muslims. Sali Berisha, in exchange for promises he never kept, received large financial investments from Muslim countries and signed numerous collaboration agreements. Internally, he favoured the Muslim community by appointing its representative as chairman of the State Secretariat of Religions. This man was responsible for all religious matters in the country. Sali Berisha chose Bashkim Gazidede, a strong northern Albanian Muslim, as head of his Secret Services. He persecuted the president’s political adversaries and was one of the main persons who influenced Berisha in his Muslim-orientated policy. In Jeddah in December 1992, Sali Berisha signed Albania’s admission into the Organisation of the Islamic Confer-
ence (OIC). Berisha was accused by the opposition of working for the establishment of an Islamic republic in Albania and favouring the development of Islamic integrationists in Albania. However, Sali Berisha did not intend to go that far. As he thought about it, he would not even have time to do it. The pyramidal crisis of 1997 started and caused his downfall.

Had Berisha been in power the following year when the Kosova/o war started, the danger of a real social and ethnic implosion in Albania might have been feared. Berisha started preaching civil violence and Albanian-Kosovar solidarity – this might have resulted in Muslim solidarity as feared by Westerners. When Fatos Nano came to power after the elections of June 1997, he filled government positions with southern Orthodox and Greek Albanians. He developed close contacts with Greece which were not approved of by a large part of the non-Orthodox population. He was criticised for reacting slowly to the Kosovars’ suffering. At the same time he launched a hysterical anti-Muslim campaign against foreign Muslim countries. Under the threat of economic loss (if these countries abandoned Albania), the government took a moderate position. It nevertheless worked with the CIA to arrest three Muslim terrorists who had planned terrorist actions in Albania.

Islam has lost, for the moment, its prior political ascendancy. However, things are unpredictable in Albania and the situation can change quickly. Foreign Muslim countries are less optimistic than they were in the early 1990s: the population is quite resistant to the new version of Islam despite its partial success. However, Albanian Islam, due to the loss of much of its tradition and the importance given to the development of its national features may soon miss its resources, and thus be forced to adopt external traditions to survive.

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