Culture and the Reinvention of Myths in a Border Area

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Long-term ethnographic fieldwork allows the ethnographer to become familiar with what is called 'presentation of the self', i.e., with what people say and do when they meet other people and have to create an image of themselves. A part of the presentation of the self has to do with collective identity, that is, with the presentation of the self as a member of a community, either national, local or religious, whose existence is justified on historical grounds. It is thus possible to have an idea of the impact of the myths, created and used in the nation's claim for existence, on society, especially on local communities which are not directly involved in the process of myth-making. Here we shall examine what happens to those myths in the southern Albanian district of Devoll, on the border with Greece. The argument is that although national myths are widely spread in this peripheral area, through school and media, they are shaped to a specific form by the international border and the way it influences social organisation and local perceptions of the self and the other.

National myths and their local forms

Nationwide myths created and transmitted by political and intellectual elites differ from local ones in so far as they are based on wider knowledge of society and history, while local myths are usually rooted in local society and history, even when they pertain to the whole nation. People tend to see the nation according to the organisation and contradictions of their own local society. It is thus impossible to talk of 'local myths' on one side and of 'national myths' on the other: [191] both are national in that they offer an explanation of the existence and characteristics of the nation. Moreover, constant interactions exist between the two levels, through books, school and newspapers.

As usual with national identity (Zempleni 1996) and with myth in general (Lévi-Strauss 1973), the same myths can be heard from different people and in different contexts in quite different forms. This is the case with four national myths that appear in our local society in complete contradiction with their official form, i.e. with the variant which is transmitted through schools, research institutions, state media and national politics. These four myths have to do with religion, independence, traditions and national unity.

It is common in Albania to say that all Albanians, whether Christian or Muslim, are brothers, and that their only religion is their common Albanian nationality. The dogma of national unity as against religious differentiation is at the core of the most widely-spread Albanian national rhetoric[1]. However, this rhetoric is challenged when local society is underpinned by, and conceptualised in terms of, religious differentiation. This is the case in mixed areas, where Muslims and Christians live in separate villages (or in separate neighbourhoods), and both have strong identities as religious communities – as in Devoll. In this specific context, religion cannot consist of just being Albanian. On the contrary, people are very well aware of their belonging to a specific religious community, and national identity is rarely thought of outside the basic opposition between Muslims and Christians. For instance, both Muslims and Christians claim a Christian origin for the whole nation, and Christians enjoy a higher prestige as representatives of the 'real' or 'authentic' Albanian nation. Although many declare that religion does not matter, the way people talk and behave inside local society clearly shows that they have to be Christian or Muslim in order to be Albanian, and that it is better to be Christian than Muslim.

Independence and isolation is another basis of national rhetoric, since it strengthens the feeling of the nation's uniqueness and [192] autonomous existence. However, when local society is shaped by a long tradition of emigration abroad, the official variant is again challenged. This is the case in the Devoll and, to a certain extent, in southeastern Albania, whence many people migrated to America during the first half of the twentieth century[2]. Today the area claims a cultural superiority over all other Albanian regions due to its long and continuous links with the West. Its relative wealth and the better education of its inhabitants are expressly connected to the influence of emigration to Western countries. Remote and isolated areas are never seen as the cradle and sanctuary of authentic Albanian values, but rather as backward, poor, and dangerous places. Contact with the outside world (through knowledge of foreign languages, travel or emigration) is explicitly sought out and acts as a source of social prestige.

In the same way, local people do not seem to value tradition as a marker of national identity. On the contrary, loyalty to traditions such as ritual hospitality or manliness and heroism is often stigmatised as fanaticism, i.e. as an extremist behaviour that has a negative influence on the image people give of themselves. People contrast what they see as modern and educated behaviour with what they call fanaticism, and this is called 'culture' (*kulturë*).

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[1] Repetition of such statements can be both a source of amusement and exasperation among visiting foreigners. See for instance Maspero 1997.

[2] Emigration to America is itself inscribed in a context of mobility which was first limited to the Ottoman Empire (Istanbul, Egypt)

When they feel they are not acting 'heroically' (e.g. because they are afraid of every authority), they typically reply 'We are not brave, but we have got culture' (*ne s'jemi trimë, por jemi me kulturë*). Heroism and traditions are used here not to assert national identity, but rather, by being denigrated, to give local society a distinctive image of modernity.

The difference between the North and the South in Albania – the distinction between Ghegs and Tosks – is usually seen as historic, linguistic and ethnic. However, in local society the words *geg* and *tosk* are never heard and the relevant distinction is simply between "North" and "South". There is no actual territorial border between North and South: the difference lies on distinctive representations of the 'self' and the 'other' rather than on geography or society. This is obvious in the conception of space. From the local point of view, the North is sometimes seen as an entirely mountainous area inhabited by backward and dirty shepherds. With no roads or contact with the outside, the North is a closed space. Local society, said to be representative of the South, is then characterised by its agriculture and its links with the world. However, at different times, due to its own mountains, local society pretends [193] to be higher, in terms of both altitude and moral value. The North is then seen as a composite of lowlands and valleys open to bad influences and filled with a filthy atmosphere. The difference between North and South thus appears as a local and contextual realisation of underlying symbolic oppositions between high and low, open and closed, dirty and clean, and is not historicised or ethnicised as a distinctive feature of the nation[3].

Once again, these variations should not be understood as an opposition between a local conception and a national one. In fact, when asked openly, people usually tend to answer by the official form of those myths, which is known nation-wide. The local forms appear in everyday and informal conversation as a reaction to events or to the behaviour of other people. The difference is thus rather between a constructed and idealised form of national identity, and a second form, rooted in everyday life and in local social relationships. Both can be seen as discourses of a society on itself, but their production and destination are different.

Moreover, in local conceptions, all these myths have to do with the concept of 'culture'. The opposition between Muslims and Christians is conceived in terms of the cultural superiority of the latter, as with the opposition of North versus South, tradition versus modernity, and isolation versus links with the outside world. The concept of culture thus appears as a key to the understanding of these myths and of their impact on society.

The concept of culture

First of all, it is important to note that the concept of culture is both a popular category which is not consciously elaborated and an over-elaborated concept in Western philosophy and social science that has had considerable influence on the Albanian national

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[3] On the local forms of national identity in the Devoll, see de Rapper 1998.

movement. Among local populations people talk about culture and are able to apply the two categories of 'with culture' (*me kulturë*) and 'without culture' (*pa kulturë*) to both individuals and communities, but no one is able to give an extensive definition of what culture is. The dictionary definition, on the other hand, does not fit with the local conception. The definition that follows is thus based on my own [194] elaboration of various applications of the word in everyday situations.

Culture can be defined by a series of four components on the one hand, and by its functioning on the other. The four components are as follows:

Language. 'To have culture' means first to speak one's own language correctly, i.e. in the standard form rather than by using a local dialect. It also means speaking at least one of the most valued foreign languages (English, French, Italian). For instance, during the electoral campaign of 1996, all the candidates of the Devoll were presented in meetings as speaking several foreign languages. Almost certainly most of them were far from actually speaking so many different languages, but the very fact that they were said to speak a foreign language has such a high cultural value that no one in the audience would think of questioning this ability. Someone who is said to speak one or more than one foreign languages 'has culture' and thus cannot be a cheater.

We are very close here to the Gellnerian model of the nation, with its need for a unified national language. Culture here means 'national culture' as opposed to the remains of local diversity, and people from the Devoll feel proud that the way they speak is very close to standard Albanian.

Knowledge. Any kind of knowledge is valued, especially if it has been learned at school or university, or by travelling abroad. The villages which are said to be 'with culture' are those where the first Albanian schools opened early in the twentieth century, as well as those from which people emigrated to the West. Once again, the insistence on schools and education reminds us of the Gellnerian model of the nation.

The outside world. 'Culture' also means contacts with the outside world through emigration or travel, or even through television or personal contacts with visiting foreigners. Once again, some foreign countries are more valued than others, and it is better, in terms of 'culture', to have family in the United States rather than in Greece, or to watch French rather than Turkish television.

Technology. 'Culture' has also a material dimension, related to the modernisation of village life. Villages with paved streets, water, electricity, and two-storied stone houses 'have more culture' than those that have a more rural aspect. Inside the house the use of a table and chairs instead of *sofër* (the low round table) and rugs is said to be a sign of 'higher culture'. Today TV sets, refrigerators, video recorders and cameras tend to be considered both as signs of culture (they connect [195] people to the outside world and to modernity) and as a source of social prestige. Indeed, because culture is not spread equally among the population, it also brings prestige to the individuals who are credited 'with culture'. With

these two last points, 'culture' appears as a form of modernity, but more precisely as a way of learning modernity from abroad, by way of imitation.

As can be seen, the local conception of culture is not so far from the definition used in social anthropology, but it differs, first, by the importance of relations with the outside world, and, second, by its normative dimension. Clearly, from the local point of view there is only one form of 'culture', or at least one good form of it. Some people have culture, others do not, and those who have acquired it first are superior. This also means that culture is not attached to a particular group or community, but can be transmitted from one group to another. For instance, it is usually assumed that the West has more culture, and thus people in Albania should learn from foreigners how to behave and live. Culture is also a historic process, which is not given at one time to everyone. History is, so to speak, the history of how culture comes to villages and individuals all over the country.

If the local conception of culture appears to be in contradiction with the anthropological one due to its historic and normative character, it is nonetheless very close to another classical definition of it in Western tradition. Two traditions can indeed be distinguished in the definition of culture in Western thought. The first one dates back to the 18th century and the Enlightenment. Culture is seen as a distinctive feature of all human societies and is opposed to nature; it is to be understood as 'high culture' and is related to an unbroken tradition from classical antiquity. In that sense, it is considered superior: 'culture' is a kind of behaviour, knowledge and judgement to which everyone should aspire in order to be a human being and not a 'barbarian'. The second and contrary perspective relates to the 19th century and Romanticism. Culture is no longer universal and normative, but plural and peculiar: there are different cultures, each the achievement of one particular people or social, national, or religious group. Culture is thus defined as the integrated beliefs, practices and social forms that give the group its coherence and specificity[4].

The fact that the local Albanian conception is closer to the classical universalist definition does not mean that Albania was more [196] influenced by the French Enlightenment than by German Romanticism. It should rather make us question the anthropological and sociological basis of these two traditions. Both can indeed be seen as different ways of talking about identity and especially of tracing the border between the group and the outside. The relativist definition relies on the idea that each group receives its characteristics from nature, or at least from a given and unquestionable order from which all borders were drawn from the beginning. This conception will be called 'primordialist', as 'it focuses on gender and generation, kinship, ethnicity and race, for constructing and reinforcing the boundary between inside and outside'[5]. The universalist definition, on the other hand, ranks the members of the group and the outsiders on a scale of 'culture', i.e. according to their relative proximity with an absolute value, 'culture'. It will be called 'sacred' as it relates 'the collectivity to an unchanging and eternal realm of the

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[4] Kuper, 1994, p. 539 and Gellner 1983, ch. 7.
[5] Eisenstadt & Giesen, 1995, p. 77.

sacred and the sublime — be it defined as God or Reason, Progress or Rationality.'[6] Both conceptions must be understood as ideal types: they are not exclusive and can be found together, though not of equal importance, in the same national identity.

The concept of culture appears to be central to the construction of the Albanian national identity for two reasons: first, the tracing of the border between 'we' and 'the other' relies on the idea that culture should be the distinctive attribute of insiders while outsiders (and especially neighbours) as seen as barbarians, and second, culture is present in all symbolic oppositions on which national myths are constructed. Culture is thus not only one myth among many. As a structuring principle of local society and as a frame for every discourse of society on itself, the concept of culture appears to be at the basis of all the national myths and to constitute the myth par excellence.

Once again, this definition of culture should not be seen as a local form as opposed to a nation or state-centred form. It is rather the local interpretation of a concept that has been widely used and spread through Albanian history, from the beginning of the national movement until today. Indeed, apart from political independence, all national movements in South-Eastern Europe also aimed at the modernisation of society through contact with Western culture and technology, creation of a national unified language, and organisation of a national [197] educational system. However, we can look at the way culture has come to be so central in the definition of collective identities in this border area.

Culture vs. non-culture

First, some of the internal divisions of local society are conceived in terms of culture. This is mainly the case for the opposition between Muslims and Christians, which forms one of the main features of social organisation in this area. Christians form a minority in this area, as they do in Albania as a whole. Although they do not live in a separate territory, they are not entirely mixed with Muslims. They live in different villages and, in the few instances where they live in the same village, they still live in separate neighbourhoods. Moreover, a spatial differentiation exists between the two communities: Christians live in the mountains, Muslims in the lowlands (see table):

Table 1. – Space and religion in the 43 villages of the Devoll

	Lowlands	Mountains
Orthodox Christians	3 villages	6 villages
Muslims	25 villages	9 villages

As elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the mountains are strongly associated with backwardness, poverty and violence, as stated earlier regarding the difference between North and South. Lowlands, on the contrary, are associated with agriculture and hence

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[6] Ibid. p. 82.

wealth and the possibility of sustaining a larger population. Muslim villages are always bigger than Christian mountain villages. This spatial difference thus relates to a social differentiation which has to do with occupation (Muslims are peasants, Christians are craftsmen) and prosperity (life is easier in the plain than in the mountains). It also has a historical dimension; because of Ottoman political and administrative organisation, the ownership of agricultural lands would be easier for Muslims than for Christians, who would be driven up into the mountains which were of no special interest to the Muslims. The association of Muslims with land and prosperity is thus a result of their privileged relationship with the state, and of the authority they exercise over Christians.

The situation described above belongs to an idealised and partly imagined past, as both emigration and communism have engendered [198] deep social and economic changes. Emigration to the West, mainly to the United States, until the Second World War was more a Christian phenomenon in the Devoll partly because of their more desperate economic situation. Mostly, however, the émigrés would maintain strong links with their village of origin, either coming back every few years or sending money both for the family and the village as a community, and to working for improved conditions for all villagers by funding road works, mills or water adduction. By thus remaining members of their original community, they would contribute to social change, introducing new habits and artefacts still classified as 'modern', which in local conceptions cannot be expressed other than as being a part of 'culture'. The role of Communism was similar since by fighting traditional land ownership and religious practice, it was a strong factor in modernisation. The development of schools was also responsible for the spreading of the idea of 'culture.' As noted earlier, villagers are still proud of the long existence of schools in their villages and of the number of children they send to high school and university: it is a sign of their high level of culture compared to neighbouring villages.

Moreover, as most religious practices and beliefs were attacked by Communism, the way people identify with their religious communities had more to do with culture than with religion as such, which was also partly the case earlier, since religious communities in Ottoman society were also social groups, acting for the socialisation of their members. The opposition between religious communities is not concerned with theological differences. Nothing is done to attack the beliefs and practices of members of the other community. Rather, the way religion is experienced is partly syncretistic, with popular religion also of great importance. What is involved in the relations between the two communities is rather the construction of an image of the other, which is used to mirror one's own identity. For instance, Muslims present themselves as 'loyal' and 'generous', whereas Christians are 'disloyal' and 'selfish'. Christians on the other hand see themselves as 'intelligent' and 'thrifty' and Muslims as 'stupid' and overly 'liberal'. These crossed representations are important as they trace borders inside local society and are at the basis of most feelings of identity.

However, although each community tries to give an image of culture and are prompt to stigmatise its absence in the behaviour of members of the other community, there is a general acknowledgement of the higher culture of Christians. This is best expressed by the

Muslims themselves claiming Christian origin and presenting their conversion to Islam as accidental. Christians are also generally credited with better [199] education and closer links with the outside world. Through emigration and education they are given credit for most of the social changes of the last decades, from clothes (Christians dress *allafranga*) to wedding ritual and food habits. Here lies the most important difference between the local conception of the nation and the national one. Both nationalist thinkers of the 19th century and communists tried to place 'culture' (meaning modernity and progress) above religion and to use it as a way to minimise religious differentiation in the new nation. However, in local conceptions, culture is a part of religion or, in other words, religious affiliation is access to culture, or to a higher level of culture. Thus the two communities are not equal in this (even if they are explicitly declared equal where personal salvation is concerned): one of them gives its members better access to culture. For historical and social reasons, dating mostly from the end of the 19th century and the 20th century, Christians as a community are given this privilege in the Devoll, in the same way as they and other minorities such as the Jews and Armenians were in other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

The cultural differentiation between Christians and Muslims probably started in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. It was given a strong emphasis during Communism, as culture became one of the symbols of the country's modernisation. The cultural difference between Christians and Muslims today results from a more recent phenomenon: the opening of the border with Greece and a large emigration to that country. In this border area Greece appears as the nearest example of a modern and prosperous state, and although the Greeks are usually criticised by both Muslims and Christians for being 'disloyal' and 'selfish', the Greek way of life is idealised as the embodiment of culture. Here Christians are again privileged due to the identification of all Christians with Greeks, which is common in this part of the Balkans.

Local myths of origin leave no room for the Illyrians. These myths are essentially summed up in statements such as 'Muslims descend from Christians' or 'our ancestors were Christians'. What local people look for is not evidence of single autochthonous nation, for which purpose the Illyrians can be cited, but rather the confirmation that they belong to the realm of culture. Similarly, the way local people talk about the difference between North and South has nothing to do with the nation's historical genesis. Local people use an imagined North as a mirror for their own weaknesses in such a way as to contrast North and South as 'without culture' (poor, backward, violent, traditional) [200] and 'with culture' (rich, developed, well-educated, modern). Once again, they get confirmation that they are on the good side, while others are not.

This chapter has sought to explain what happens to national myths once they have been created and spread inside a society. There is no fundamental opposition between national myths as expressed by the centre of the state or the elites on one hand and by local population on the other. However, local myths are shaped by specific conditions and interests which are not homogenous throughout the country. Such combinations and transformations are common to most systems of myths. Indeed the material used in these myths, such as symbolic juxtapositions, the concept of culture and representations of space,

is common to the greater part of Albanian national mythology. In this particular case national myths are mediated by the concept of culture which is itself the main means by which local people talk about themselves and others. This concept takes its meaning mainly from the specific social organisation of local society. We are thus reminded that the study of myths and representations should always be articulated in conjunction with the study of social structure.

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