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► **To cite this version:**

Gilles de Rapper. Religion on the border: Sanctuaries and festivals in post-communist Albania. Galia Valtchinova. Religion and Boundaries. Studies from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Turkey, The Isis Press, pp.247-265, 2010. halshs-00400432

HAL Id: halshs-00400432

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00400432>

Submitted on 30 Jun 2009

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To be published in G. Valtchinova (ed.), *Religion on the Boundary and the Politics of Divine Interventions. Proceedings of the International Conference, Sofia 14-18 April 2006*. Istanbul, Isis Press.

RELIGION ON THE BORDER:
SANCTUARIES AND FESTIVALS IN POST-COMMUNIST ALBANIA

Gilles de Rapper

This paper is an attempt to bring together observations conducted in three ‘sanctuaries’ in south-east Albania and observations regarding the international border between Greece and Albania, with special attention to its impact on local society. Data were collected in 1995-96 and 2003 in the districts of Korçë and Devoll in the frame of a project on the transformations of Albanian borderlands since 1990. Religious practice in itself was not the focus of my study: the three ‘sanctuaries’ were visited only for a few days, on the occasion of their annual festivals. What was happening at those times appeared however indicative of many aspects of Albanian society in this borderland context, regarding for instance the relation between Muslims and Christians or the impact of migration in Greece.

The aim of this paper is not a detailed exploration of religious life in the three places in question but, rather, to contextualise the three festivals in the border area. It suggests that ‘sacred places’ are not insignificant, but highly relevant to borders and boundaries. Several aspects of the link between sanctuaries and the border can be listed and serve as hypothesis for further explorations:

— By the end of Communism in Albania, international borders – kept closed for decades – opened at the same time when places of worship throughout the country – closed in 1967 with the ban on religion – became open to the public again. What was then the meaning of visiting sacred places, on both sides of the border, for people who experienced the opening of the border? It seems from our first observations that if a visit to a sanctuary can be a way to gain protection for a journey that continues to be perilous,

the opening of the border has made new sanctuaries accessible to local believers, whose ‘power’ is increased by their location on the other side of the border.

— Festivals bring together, in the same place and at the same time, people whose positions toward the border are different. In the cases discussed here, the common participation of Muslims and Christians in religious festivals taking place in the border area seems to be closely connected to the differentials generated by the border between Greece and Albania. Migration of many Muslim Albanians to a Christian country has given a renewed and crucial meaning to the boundary between Muslims and Christians inside Albanian society.¹ Religious festivals are times when this boundary is likely to be negotiated for migration purposes. This is also true for other boundaries, such as the one between Albanians on the one hand and Aromanians and Roma on the other, two groups who locally enjoy cross-border networks and facilities to cross the border, and who have particular claims on some sanctuaries. Observations of festivals might thus be a way to reach a better understanding of interethnic relations in post-communist Albania.

— Finally, festivals are times when migrants returning from Greece or other countries of destination manifest their attachment to their village of origin; they are also times when departing migrants seek divine protection as well as human support to achieve their crossing of the border. Observing religion practices in the sanctuaries can thus inform us on migration process.

In the first part of the paper, sanctuaries are described within the international border area. In the second part, I explore the impact of the international border on the definition and attendance of the sanctuaries.

I focus on three sanctuaries located in the villages of Voskopojë, Vithkuq (district of Korçë) and Hoçisht (district of Devoll). These are Christian sanctuaries which – as elsewhere in the Balkans and the Mediterranean (Albera 2005) – are also frequented by Muslims, especially on the saint patron’s day. In the outskirts of the village of Voskopojë – in a mountainous area west of the city of Korçë – the abandoned monastery of Saint John the Baptist (*Shën Prodhrom*) is celebrated on June 24th. A few days later, in quite a similar location, people visit the abandoned monastery of Saint Peter (*Shën Pjetër*) in Vithkuq, on June 29th. Finally, on July 1st, an impressive crowd gathers around the small church of Saints Cosmas and Damian, in the village of Hoçisht, east of Korçë, in a place called Satrivaç.² I first went to Voskopojë in 1995, with a Muslim family from Bilisht who had links with the village: the head of the family had married a woman from Voskopojë. The

¹ The religious boundary between Muslims and Christians, as one of the lines that divide post-communist Albanian society, is attested in various ways: in the spatial distribution of members of both communities in separate villages; in the low level of intermarriage; in the use of a wide range of names (for both self- and exo-designation), including the words for ‘race’ and ‘nation’ to refer to religious communities; and finally in a system of stereotypes through which the ‘nature’ of Muslims and Christians is made a part of popular sociology (de Rapper 2002).

² The name Satrivaç is generally acknowledged as originating from Bulgarian *Sveti Vrači* or ‘Holy Healers’, a name given to Saints Cosmas and Damian. The saints themselves are called in Albanian *Shën Anargjirë*, from Greek *ἀναργυροί*. The two doctors reached holiness by refusing payment from their patients.

next year, I went to Hoçisht while I was staying with another Muslim family in Bilisht. The extended family used to gather annually for a picnic in Satrivaç, on the saint's day or the day before. I returned to both places on my own in 2003 and added a visit to Vithkuq, where I had never been before.

Sanctuaries on the border

Although there is no space for a detailed description of these places and festivals (*festë, panair*),³ several points should be made in order to understand what these places and moments are. The scene is similar in the three places: people arrive in the afternoon, on the day before the saint's day, and spend the night on the spot, either inside the church or in the area around the church. There is a religious celebration in the evening and another one the next morning, on the saint's day. People spend that day in visits to the church and meetings with friends and family. A long time is spent for picnic, for which a lamb might be sacrificed on the spot and food distributed around. Departures from the sanctuary start after lunchtime. By the end of the afternoon, the place is empty.

The first point concerns the location of those places in the religious landscape. The three villages are known as Christians villages where Muslims have recently settled, especially during communist times, so that today their population is said to be 'mixed' (*i përzier*). They are also surrounded by Muslim villages, or by demographically depressed Christian villages; in other words, from the Christian point of view, the villages and their surroundings have lost a part of their Christian character. In the case of Voskopojë and Vithkuq, this loss is told in a more dramatic mode: both villages are known to have been prosperous Christian cities in the 18th century, before they were plundered and destroyed during repeated attacks by local Muslims. The churches and monasteries still existing – including Saint John's and Saint Peter's discussed here – date back to those times of prosperity and wealth (1765 and 1763 respectively).⁴ The festivals thus take place in rural and somehow deprived spaces where Christians have an ambiguous status: as a minority whose existence is challenged by a growing Muslim majority; as a privileged minority whose religion affords facilities in migration and a better and European image, in contrast to the Muslim majority who enjoys a less comfortable reputation in Greece and complains of the difficulties they meet in migration.

The second point is that although local villagers take part in the feast, most of the visitors are urban families coming from the city of Korçë or from more distant cities. Some of them claim familial origins from the villages or at least identify with the sanctuaries as local or regional ones. The conditions in which the festivals take place are thus characterised by the rapid and strong urbanisation of Albania since 1990 and by the stress put by both villagers and new urban-dwellers on locality and on the notion of origin. In this

³ The second word is Greek πανηγύρι, 'festival, feast, fair'.

⁴ For a historical account, see Adhami 1998, Plasari 2000 and Falo 2003.

way, festivals and sanctuaries participate in the reshaping of local territories in Albanian society.

Finally, the three sanctuaries are not the only ones of their kind in the area. People who visit them each year have already gone, or plan to go, to other places, including similar sanctuaries such as Saint Mary's church (*Shën Meri*) at Boboshticë (August 15th) and Saint Marina's monastery (*Shën Marenë*) in Llëngë (Pogradec), celebrated on July 17th. They also visit Muslim sanctuaries, such as the Bektashi tekke of Turan. All those places are known both as holy places in which healing and relief can be obtained and as tourist places of rural or mountainous scenery where one can get rid of the stress and fatigue of urban life.

More interestingly for our purpose, this network of shrines and sanctuaries is also a cross-border network: it includes for instance the monastery of Saint Naum (*Sveti Naum*), located on the shore of Lake Ohrid, just on the other side of the border between Albania and Macedonia. It is said that the development of this sanctuary as a centre for the healing of mental disease, as early as the first half of the 18th century, is linked to the flourishing of Voskopojë (Elsie 2001: 186)⁵. This fact can explain that Sveti Naum is still considered a holy place by people who are visiting the monastery of Saint John in Voskopojë. It is also known that the monastery, whose land property extended westwards inside Albania, was at first attributed to the new Albanian state in 1913, and then to Yugoslavia in 1925, after bilateral discussions on the final borders of Albania (Lory, Nathanaili 2002).

The cross-border network of sacred places also includes churches in the nearest Greek villages, in the district of Kastoria. At the time of the most important Christian Orthodox celebrations – Easter and August 15th – those villages are visited by Albanian villagers – including Muslims – who (illegally) cross the border to take part in the religious celebrations or to enjoy the festive atmosphere of the day. In this case however, visiting Greek villages seems to be often associated with the memory of a time when the border did not exist or, as some villagers say, “when the borders of Albania were much further”. For the Macedonian-speaking villagers of Vërnik, for instance, crossing the border to celebrate Easter in the Greek village of Kristallopigi – as they did *en masse* in 1991 – is a reminiscence of the time when that village was named Smrdeš and was inhabited by Slav-speakers with whom Vërnik used to intermarry. In this case, the international border was given a new, ethnic meaning after the Greek civil war (1946-49), when Slav-speakers left for Yugoslavia and were replaced by a new population loyal to the Greek state, thus isolating Vërnik on the Albanian side of the border. Further south, the Muslims inhabitants of Miras, Menkulas and Vidohovë who cross the border and visit the Greek villages of Dipotamia and Kominiades on August 15th are also aware that until 1924 those villages, named Revan and Shag, were inhabited by Albanian-speaking Muslims with whom they intermarried, before they had to leave to Turkey and were replaced by Orthodox Christians coming from Anatolia (de Rapper 1997).

⁵ Some of the icons in Sveti Naum, as well as in Shën Marenë, were painted by Konstantin Jeromonaku Voskopojari (1660-?), while, after 1745, the city's printing house changed its name from Saint Luke to Saint Naum (Adhami 1998: 80-81). See also Thëllimi 2004: 88-92.

If, in a way, crossing the international border to visit a church or a monastery seems to add to the benefit one can expect from a visit to a holy place, these examples suggest that religious matters are not the only ones at stake. Due to the risks and difficulties of crossing a severely controlled border, holy places on the other side of the border appear, to some extent, more efficient than those on this side; their value, however, is not just religious: they are also parts of ‘Albanian soil’ (*tokë shqiptare*) that had to be abandoned on the other side of the border. In both cases, it seems that crossing the border for religious purposes cannot be dissociated from local attempts to question the national meaning of the international border, or at least to recall memories of a time when there was no border.

Although only limited data were collected on this topic, there are indications that the three sanctuaries discussed here are also visited by people coming from the other side of the border. This is particularly the case in Voskopojë and Vithkuq, which have a specific relationship to the outside world. Both villages are not only considered as former prosperous Christian cities; according to a part of the local population and to some historians, the two cities were in those times in majority or exclusively inhabited by Aromanians, locally known as Vlachs (*Vllah*), who fled away at the time of the destruction (Falo 2003). They settled in other cities where they had already connections due to their activities in long distance trade in the Balkans and Europe. Voskopojë and Vithkuq are thus considered by some as the metropolis of the Aromanian ‘diaspora’ in the Balkans. When the time of the festivals comes, with Aromanians from Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece or Romania coming to Albania, Voskopojë and Vithkuq are no longer enclosed inside the Albanian borders. It is then time for local inhabitants to tell stories that connect their village to the outside world – and to plan travel or migration.

In both ways, there seems to be a frequent conjunction between visiting a holy place and crossing the border. The international border also appears in past events connected to most of the shrines and sanctuaries of the area. Those events, dating back to the time when the border was established (at the beginning of 20th century) or referring to times when it was violated (for instance during First and Second World Wars) are integrative parts of the shrines as sacred places. The Bektashi tekke of Kuç, a few kilometres from the Greek border, was thus profaned by Greek soldiers during the Balkan Wars, in the early 20th century, who killed the abbot (*baba*). A modern author writes that the bloodstained hat of the abbot was carefully kept and shown to visitors years after the event: every attempt to remove the blood stains from it and from the floor of the tekke failed (Hysi 2004: 116)⁶. In Voskopojë, the monastery of Saint John was used as a ‘sanctuary’ by the inhabitants who looked for protection during the battles fought between the French and Austrian armies in 1916 which caused the last destruction of the village (Falo 2003: 126). Later on, in 1943, the monastery was used as a Partisan base and, for that reason, became a target of Italian air strikes and was partly destroyed by a fire. Once again, festivals or simple visits to the sanctuaries appear as a time when the violent history of the area can be told and taught to pilgrims and believers. In a way, it seems that the fame and efficiency of a sacred place increase when it is known to have been victim of violence and destruction. Actually, this is

⁶ See also Clayer 1990: 340-341.

also true of many places of worship (churches, mosques) which become venerated as sacred places after their destruction during Communism.

Finally, it is possible to draw a parallel between the status of the shrines and the status of the border during communist times. Both were occupied by the army and closed by fences and wires. In the 1970s, that was a way for the authorities to avoid people going illegally to sanctuaries that were officially closed. At the same time, the borderline was out of reach for most of the people living in the area: along the line, up to one kilometre on the Albanian side, ran the 'forbidden zone', which was closed by a barbed wire fence and prevented people from running away. Today, pilgrims tell stories of secret visits to sanctuaries that remind of other stories about people escaping to another world by crossing the forbidden border zone. This parallelism is best illustrated by the story of how Satrivaç was turned to a church again in 1991. It happens, the Christian caretaker told me in 1996, even before the barbed wire fence was torn down at the border, at Easter 1991. The initiative and first financial contribution to restore Satrivaç as a place of worship came from a former inhabitant of the village who was living in Sweden. This man was a Muslim, originating from the small Muslim neighbourhood in the otherwise Christian village of Hoçisht. Under Enver Hoxha's dictatorship, when Albania's borders were locked, he decided to leave and run away to Greece, through a mountain path he knew. Arriving on the edge of the forbidden zone, before reaching the borderline, he was arrested by soldiers whose orders were to shoot to kill at every runaway. Before they could fire on him he shouted that he was from Satrivaç. On hearing the name of the famous sanctuary, the soldiers let him go and cross the border. He arrived safely in Greece and, from there, moved to Sweden. In 1991, as a sign of gratitude towards the place whose name had been powerful enough to open the border, he asked that the church should be open again. In this case, the sanctuary opens the border and, in return, is opened by a border crossing.

I have not collected similar stories for the other sanctuaries. It seems however, that other shrines are visited by those who are about to cross the border and migrate to Greece: a visit to a shrine is supposed to open the border or to open the road for the migrants. This is the case for instance in the village of Menkulas, located less than two kilometres from the Greek border. A man who has a shrine in his courtyard explains that he was compelled by the village communist authorities to build his house on a site known as a 'sacred place' (*vakëf*) in 1978. In 1991, when the ban on religion was lifted, he built a shrine on the very spot known as *vakëf*. In 1996 he was pretending that "many 'refugees' (*refugjat*, i.e. migrants) come to the shrine before their departure to Greece; they all say it is efficient. The road is open to them and they don't meet any soldier or policeman." Although a Muslim, the man has built the shrine as it would have been in Greece: with a small niche for the icon and a cross on the top. In this area where lots of people migrate and try to cross the border, sacred places appear as resources, among others, to cross safely. Their Christian or ambiguous religious characteristics – such as in the above example – is probably used by Muslim migrants setting out for a Christian country to augment their 'chance' (*fat*).

On the other side of the border, there are examples of migrants who have just crossed the border safely and leave offerings in the churches or chapels they come across.

For instance, the path used by illegal migrants to go from Vërnik to Kristallopigi and avoid the border post comes across the abandoned village of Dhambel. It is said in Vërnik that people left the village because it was too close to the border: the lands were on one side, the houses on the other. The old village church is the only building whose walls are still rising among the ruins. Although desolated and uninhabited – or rather because of that – the place is still considered sacred by the migrants (it is a *vakëf*) who leave small money and lit a candle on a small shrine just outside the church.

All these examples suggest that sanctuaries are not insignificant places in the border landscape. The relation between border practices and some religious practices appears as double oriented: on one hand, places of worship located on the other side of the border are places of destination by themselves, their efficiency is supposed to be higher because they necessitate an extraordinary act, such as crossing the international border. On the other hand, some sacred places are reputed to make border crossings easier: one has to visit them before setting out for the border.

Borders in the sanctuaries

There might be another aspect in the relation between sanctuaries and the international border: if, on one side, sanctuaries seem to open the border; on the other side, the border is brought to and enforced in the sanctuaries. This raises the question of sanctuaries as places where national unity is both challenged and reasserted.

In this respect, sanctuaries are not only characterised by their religious ambiguity: they are also places of national ambiguity, places where the ambiguity of the border area is made visible to participants. In order to understand the relation between religious ambiguity and national ambiguity, it is necessary to introduce the local notion of *vakëf*, which is used to designate the three sanctuaries in Voskopoje, Vithkuq and Hoçisht, but also, as we have already noticed, many others. We have seen for instance the case of a Muslim villager building a shrine of a Christian type in his own courtyard, in clear relation to the expectations of some of the people who visit the place before crossing the border to work in Greece. One might draw a parallel between such cases and the conversion of Muslim Albanian migrants to Orthodoxy, in order to facilitate their acceptance in Greek society. This example is also revealing of the status of such places of worship, which are not only common in the border area, but are also located, so to speak, on the boundary between Muslims and Christians.

At a certain level, Muslims and Christians are associated to one type of ‘places of worship’ (*vend kult*): Muslims go to the mosque (*xhami*), while Christians go to the church (*kishë*). At another level however, as our observations reveal, some Christian churches are also attended by Muslims (and, less often, Muslim sanctuaries are visited by Christians). Most of the time, those churches are not the village main church, located at the centre of the village and used for daily services. They are rather isolated churches, located outside the village or on its periphery, and they are an object of devotion only at particular moments

during the year, being closed most of the time. Those churches are called *vakëf* by Muslims and Christians alike. The word is also used for many other places which receive different kinds of devotion, either on a daily or extraordinary basis: tombs and cemeteries, ruined churches and mosques, monasteries, trees, springs, etc. All the places known as *vakëf* are considered sacred, no matter if they were originally Christian or Muslims places. A *vakëf* is not identified with a specific religious community: it has its own power and its own rules. The Muslim pilgrims who come to Satrivaç for Saints Cosmas and Damian festival are attending the place as *vakëf* rather than as a church, although they are aware that it is managed by the Orthodox Church. I first heard about Satrivaç by a Muslim family with whom I was staying, in the small town of Bilisht. They always mentioned the place as *vakëf*, so that when I went there for the first time in June 1996, I was surprised to discover a church of Saints Cosmas and Damian. The small building did not look very much like a church (it had been used as an office by the army during communist times), but it had a cross on the roof and the main object of devotion was an icon of the saints. When I told my hosts that we were actually visiting a church, they replied: “This is not a church, it is a *vakëf*.”

Most of the *vakëf* are known by Muslims and Christians alike. Their sacred nature, expressed in terms of ‘power’ (*fuqi*), is above their identification as Muslim and Christian, and they call for comparable practices from all visitors. In a way, *vakëf* appear as places of peaceful encounter between Muslims and Christians, as places where the religious boundary becomes blurred and less marked. For that reason, they have generally been considered by Albanian anthropologists as a manifestation of ‘popular religion’; either Muslim or Christian today, *vakëf* originate from popular and pagan cults that form the core of a genuine Albanian ‘ethnic tradition’ (Tirtja 1976: 66), more living and authentic than the imported and official monotheistic cults. Indeed, observations confirm that *vakëf* are places of coexistence between Muslims and Christians and question the meaning of the religious boundary. As a lady from Bilisht – of Muslim background – explains, concerning a *vakëf* located in the nearby village of Kuç, “a *vakëf* is like a mosque, but it is usually smaller, it just has one single room. But you can see there all the things that are usually inside a mosque: icons, candles, etc. There is no *boxhë*, people go there whenever they want to, just as they do in churches.” Like a mosque with icons: *vakëf* are not so different from other places of worship; but they bring together things that are usually separated.

Contrary to the anthropologists, people who attend the *vakëf* do not consider them as a survival of their national and pagan past. Although religious boundaries might appear blurred, they cannot be said to disappear or become insignificant: in local conceptions, most important *vakëf* are places where people from different religious or ethnic background come into contact, but remain nonetheless what they are. Talking of the four *vakëf* of their village, men from Menkulas thus insist: “*vakëf* are valuable for all religions.” Before going to Satrivaç, my friends had already told me that it was “a *vakëf* for all religions”, adding that “the Orthodox Christians (*i krishterë*) go there, the Catholics (*katolik*) go there, the Muslims (*myslyman*) go there. Even the Gypsies (*evgjil*) go there, most of all the Gypsies!”

Such *vakëf* can thus enter into the category of ‘ambiguous sanctuaries’ used by Fredrick Hasluck to describe many places of worship shared by Muslims and Christians in the Balkans and Anatolia (Hasluck 1929). They are visited and claimed by various groups and may take different meanings for the people who attend them. As such, they are not only places of peaceful coexistence, but also places where groups and communities enter in competition, through the ‘competitive sharing’ (Hayden 2002) of sanctuaries. Rather than peaceful coexistence we have to do with ‘antagonistic tolerance’ (Hayden 2002). Although the Albanian situation is not similar to the one that prevailed in Kosovo at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s (Duijzings 2000), political and nationalist issues are also at stake in the ‘ambiguous sanctuaries’ of Voskopojë, Vithkuq and Hoçisht. This might be interpreted as a consequence of the very nature of those ambiguous sanctuaries – if we agree to consider them as places of vacuum and vagueness which can be filled with what people bring with them (Albera 2005) – and to their location in the border area, which makes the issue of local groups’ boundaries more sensitive. For instance, the festivals in Voskopojë, Vithkuq and Hoçisht, taking place in genuine Christian places of worship, seem to serve as an opportunity to assert the Albanian – rather than Greek – feelings of the local Orthodox Christians; they are also places and times of confrontation between Albanians and Aromanians and between Albanians and Roma.

The region has in fact been contested and is still a place of confrontation between various ideas of where the northern boundary of Hellenism lies. Everyone in the area is aware that there is a territorial issue at stake, which is itself a part of the Northern Epirus question: the city of Korçë and the villages around have been claimed to be Greek, in the past as well as in the present, while they were attributed to Albania in 1912. During the Balkan wars and the First World War, and again during the Second World War, the region was occupied by Greek military forces. The issue however is not only territorial, as both national groups tend to be defined as religious groups, so that the border between Greece and Albania tends to become a boundary between Christianity and Islam. The problem lies, as we shall see, with the Albanian Christians, i.e. Orthodox Christians who speak Albanian and whose family has been loyal to the Albanian state. According to common knowledge in Greece, those are genuine Greeks who have become Albanians as a result of the politics of des-hellenisation enforced by Albania. Today, many of them are torn between the defence of their ‘Albanian identity’ and the social and economic benefits of declaring themselves Greek in migration.

The first period (1912-1918, i.e. Balkan wars and First World War) is locally known as ‘the first Greek’ (*greku i parë*) and is remembered as a time of violence and destruction opposing Greeks and Albanians, a time when sanctuaries and places of worship were common targets of enemy forces. The second period, during the Second World War, is recalled as ‘the second Greek’ (*greku i dytë*) and is said to have been softer in terms of Greek-Albanian relations: the Greeks actually occupied the area but, rather than an inimical aggression, that was a counterattack against the invasion of Greece launched from Albania by the Italians in 1940. Moreover, later German occupation (1943) had much more disastrous consequences in Greece than in Albania, on the social and economic levels, so that the ‘second Greek’ is also a time when starving Greek villagers were crossing the

border in search of food and jobs in the Albanian villages. Finally, the post-1990 period is sometimes called ‘the third Greek’. This time, Greeks are said to be helpful to the Albanians by offering them jobs in Greece or in Albania. The threat on Albanian national territory, however, is still there: according to the people who stand up for the Albanian identity of Northern Epirus, the threat of hellenisation is real.

Actually, work migration towards Greece tends to introduce in Albania, in return, behaviours, goods and ideas that result in narrowing the distance between Albanians and Greeks. The Greek language, for instance, which was forbidden during communist times, is now spoken by returnees, by children born in migration and is taught in many private courses, as a way to facilitate work opportunities in Greece. As early as the mid-1990, some local Albanians were afraid of the fact that migrants – Christian and Muslim alike – tended to change their first names and family names for Greek ones in order to make easier their entry and stay in Greece. Such changes would result in a – at least formal – hellenisation of the population that would give grounds to the Greek claims on the area.

Finally, as far as religion is concerned, the fact that the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church is lead by a Greek citizen is not always appreciated. The politics of building new churches – on Greek architectural models – rather than restoring the old ones is criticised as a way to erase the Albanian nature of local Orthodox Christianity. When I first visited the Museum of Medieval Art in Korçë, in June 1995, and again in June 2003, the restorers who guided me through the collection of icons all insisted on the Albanian origin and characteristics of the painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, as bearers of an Albanian Orthodox tradition distinct from Greek Orthodoxy.

On the Muslim point of view, Christians, due to the general connection between Orthodox Christianity and Hellenism, are often suspected of letting their national belonging aside for the material and symbolic benefits they can expect from hellenisation.

Three examples will illustrate how the tension between Greek and Albanian positions is manifested during the religious festivals. In Voskopojë, in June 2003, a plate fixed on the wall inside the porch of the monastery indicated the name of the main donator who made possible the extension works in 1910. The text is written in Albanian and bears the date 1910. The plate, however, is likely to be a new one: the old plate has been removed and can still be seen in a corner of the church’s narthex, where it lies on the floor, much less exposed to the visitors’ eyes. The text is identical to the one on the new plate, but written in Greek. The growing attendance to the monastery thus comes along with the concern for a clear assertion of its location on Albanian territory and in Albanian history.

In Vithkuq, on the eve of Saint Peter’s day, during my visit to Saint Michael church, around which is one of the village graveyards, the villager who accompanied me led me to a tomb known as the “baptism tomb” (*varri i pagëzimit*) and told me that it had an interesting history. “A newborn child, he said, was to be baptised at the church. The parents insisted that the ceremony should take place in Albanian, but the priest was Greek and refused to have the ceremony in Albanian. While they were quarrelling, the child was left alone in a

corner of the church, and he died. All this happened around 1870 or 1880, I don't know." Here again, the village in which the festival takes place appears as a field of battle between Albanians and Greeks, where religion is a weapon in the hands of the latter.

In the village of Hoçisht, finally, on Saint Cosmas day, a mass is given in the church of Saint John the Baptist, at the entrance of the village. In 2003, on this occasion, the local pope welcomes his colleague from Pogradec, who pronounces the homily. His homily begins with the story of Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian. He insists on the fact that most of us are spiritually ill and that healing can be obtained in the church, but also at hospitals, where doctors are helped by God. When he comes to the account of the general situation of Christian religion in Albania in the year 2003, his speech takes a more 'national' meaning. A condemnation of Greek and Slav neighbours comes along with the assertion of the Albanian specificity and primacy in the religious domain: "The Greeks are proud, he goes on, the Slavs are proud [i.e. of being Orthodox Christians], but we are the first ones! We saw the crucifixion, we saw the entombment, and we saw the resurrection! We saw the crucifixion of the Christ when religion was banned in 1967, we saw the entombment when the churches were turned into stables and warehouses, and finally we saw the resurrection when the Holy Spirit came back to Albania in 1991."

From such a point of view, the Muslim participation is a way to reinforce the Albanian nature of the sanctuaries against the Greek claims and threat: it expresses national unity and solidarity. The participation of pilgrims coming from other and more remote areas of Albania, either originating from the area or not, also plays a role in the assertion of the Albanian characteristics of the sanctuaries.

Other distinctions and meanings appear in the three villages: Voskopojë and Vithkuq are indeed, since the 1990s, important places of the 'Aromanian revival' both in Albania and the Balkans (Gossiaux 2002). This is especially the case in Voskopojë, whose churches, history and architectural patrimony are claimed to be genuinely Aromanian and which is considered by many as the place of origin of all the Aromanian diaspora. In Albania, the revival movement is sustained by a number of organisations and publications aiming mostly at the valorisation of Aromanian traditions. Their purpose is to obtain the recognition of the historic Voskopojë as an Aromanian city – rather than Greek or Albanian – and as the centre from which Aromanian culture flourished in the Balkans in the 18th century. In this perspective, the numerous churches and shrines scattered on the village territory are associated with Aromanian traditions. In his book on the 'tragedy of Voskopojë', Dhori Falo describes the festival of Saint Constantine, celebrated on May 29th in an ancient monastery located 'in the mountain' (*në mal*), south-west of the village, as it used to take place before the communist takeover. According to him, the whole festival was a reminiscence of the old nomadic and pastoral way of life of ancient Aromanians (Falo 2003: 181-182): "They would set out with their horses and mules, with clothes to open up on the meadow, with a lamb for the sacrifice, alive on the packsaddle, with food and drinks. They would take their meal up there, in the midst of pine trees, and cut the sheep's throat, for blood had to flow on that day. The sheep was cooked on a spit: that was

like a miniature reminder of the Aromanian's life of the past, a reminder of mountain huts and fresh meat on the spit, like the revival of past tradition.”

The Aromanian identity of Voskopojë is not expressed through evocations of shepherds' life alone. Voskopojë is also an illustration of another side of Aromanian identity as it is elaborated by Aromanian activists: Aromanians are not only shepherds; they are also urban dwellers, merchants and intellectuals (Gossiaux 2002). In this perspective, religious festivals express also, and foremost, the ‘cultivated’ (*me kulturë*) and ‘civilised’ (*i qytetëruar*) characteristics of the most ancient inhabitants of Voskopojë, Aromanians, in contrast to the Muslim peasants living in the surrounding villages. Dhori Falo thus writes (Falo 2003): “A whole world separated the progressive Christianity of Voskopojë from its pagan neighbours, supposedly Muslim, who adored other idols such as violence, savagery, theft, destruction and ragged and raging crowds.” Today, traces of the urban past of the village are still looked for and valued: sections of paved streets and roads, remains of sewerage system, sites of former public buildings are considered as testimonies of the urban specificities of this mountain village. This effort toward the preservation of architectural testimonies of the village history has recently been supported by foreign NGOs, such as the French *Patrimoine sans frontières*, who are working at restoring some of the churches. The project explicitly named *Voskopojë sans frontières* (‘Voskopojë without borders’) resulted however in the publication of a book in which the supporters of Voskopojë's Aromanian identity did not find themselves back: no mention at all was made of Aromanians nor of their role in local history (Durand 2005, Trifon 2006).

After several assaults and destruction by its Muslim neighbours, Voskopojë is no more than a big village in which Aromanian population is not in majority anymore. Albanian-speaking Christians and Muslims have come and settled, especially after the Second World War, when life conditions became more attractive in what was turned into an administrative centre rather than in remote mountain villages. Saint John's festival retains however something of an urban life due to the fact that many pilgrims come from the city of Korçë. The village is also more and more occupied by people from Tirana and Korçë who restore or build houses they use as second homes in the country. In 2003, according to the mayor, around thirty houses had been bought by people from Korçë and other cities while the village population amounted to 223 families. In doing so, the newcomers continue the tourist calling of the village which was already encouraged by Communists and to which the village owed its workers' and children's holiday camps. They also contribute to modify the demographic balance between Aromanians and Albanians, between Muslims and Christians and between local inhabitants and newcomers.

Satrivaç is also visited at the same time by the Christian and Muslim inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, and by lots of pilgrims coming from Korçë and other cities. On the village inhabitants' point of view actually, the festival of Saint Cosmas, on July 1st, is not only a ‘local’ festival, as a patron saint's day might be in other villages. The place is overrun by Roma coming from Korçë who are suspected of considering the festival to be their own. The evening and the night of June 30 are thus perceived by some local villagers as a time when Rom attendance is so strong that some of them avoid going to the shrine and

prefer to wait the next day and the departure, starting before lunchtime, of the pilgrims who have spent the night on the spot.

Roma are present in the two other festivals, in Voskopojë and Vithkuq: there are Roma among the participants but they are especially remarkable as sellers of food, drinks and small articles (sunglasses, clothes, toys) and as musicians. In Satrivaç however, their visibility is greater and they are active participants in the feast, for instance by using the sanctuary kitchen to cook food that is later distributed (chicken stew, doughnuts) and by offering icons and liturgical implements to the church. Their great visibility and activity have consequences on the festival itself. As noticed earlier, non-Roma, and especially local villagers who have the possibility to choose the time they think more suitable to go to the sanctuary, tend to avoid the evening and the night, thus leaving Roma even more room in the festival. In 2003, the local religious authorities tried to slow down the 'invasion': they planted pine trees on the ground just behind the church. The reason given was to embellish the otherwise bare surroundings of the church and to offer shade to picnickers when the trees grow. Another reason, however, was to avoid the cars parking close to the church: in recent years, the spot had been occupied by Roma families picnicking and making music all night long close to their cars, while other pilgrims were praying inside the church. This attempt was not a complete success and many trees were damaged during the night, most probably by accident.

Satrivaç is the only place where policemen are visible around the sanctuary from the beginning to the end of the festival. Is this another response, coming from the state authorities, to large scale participation of Roma? Roma have indeed the reputation of being quarrelsome and police forces might be there to guarantee that nobody fights (if so, the result is not necessary the one expected: in 2003, a quarrel arose between participants, notwithstanding the intervention of policemen). One might also think of the necessity for the state to assert its control on the border area (of the three sanctuaries, Satrivaç is the closest to the border), again in relation to Roma participation. Roma are indeed perceived in this area as 'border specialists': they are said to cross almost freely and to hold a great part of the cross-border trade, either legal or illegal. Actually, places like Satrivaç function in a way as markets where goods coming from Greece are sold by Roma.

To conclude, there seems to be a complex relationship between local manifestations of piety and the international border: in this contested border area, where the territorial and minorities issues are intertwined with considerations about the religious boundary between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, the border has probably an impact on the existence of sanctuaries and shrines all over the area, as well as on their meaning and use by various local groups. On the other hand, sanctuaries and shrines can be seen as places where the social production of the border takes place; places where the border is challenged or reasserted, places where the border is experienced by and made visible to local population.

The limited scope of this survey does not allow general conclusions on the link between religious phenomena and borders. In this specific case, migration toward Greece is certainly a decisive element: there are indications that it enforces boundaries between local

groups (in terms of religion or ethnicity) and generates inequality between them. Some have privileged access to Greece, while others have to develop particular strategies to succeed (de Rapper, Sintès 2006). The consequences of communist policy toward religion are also of importance here: the closing or destruction of all places of worship between 1967 and 1990 and the elimination of institutional religious specialists have probably left room for local manifestations of religious life, which gained visibility and intensity after the ban on religion was lifted. It might be of some importance that these manifestations of local religion most often put the stress on the sacredness and power of specific places – *vakëf* – more than anything else. In this case, local religion can indeed be said to be the religion of particular *loci* which, because they are shared by all religious and ethnic groups in the area, are also places of conjunction and contact as well as places of disjunction and conflict, just what borders are.

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