The Politics of Religion in the Reconstruction of Identities: The Albanian Situation

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Abstract ■ In order to appreciate the very historical significance of the succes-
sive processes of conversion and reconversion among Albanians and other
Southeast European populations, and to subject them to a more effective
anthropological analysis, this article argues that they should be understood in
terms of the dynamics of objectification and resistance against pressures exerted
by authorities holding political and religious power. This approach allows us to
put the meaning of religious affiliations into the perspective of negotiation and
redefinition of social identities, leading to the transformation of Albanian iden-
tity and ethnicity, and re-establishing traditions of political, social and national
history.
Keywords ■ Albanian ■ conversion ■ ethnicity ■ religion

The study of religious belief, collective identity and Islamic conversion of
Albanians and other Southeast European groups provokes both passion
and research. The origins of Islamic conversion, its nature and its ration-
ale, are still subject to academic debate, and even to ideological and senti-
mental confrontation, as indeed are its consequences for Albanian ethnicity
and for Albanians as a people, and for inter-ethnic relations in the entire
region. Islamic conversion is still a delicate issue, and there has as yet been
no serious analysis of why different social groups choose to convert. The
understanding of inter-religious relationships in Albania in the context of
mass Islamic conversion during the period between the 16th and 18th cen-
turies remains difficult, despite substantial historical research in this area.
The increase of partisan approaches confronting national historiographies
which are steeped in an official demagogy – communist or nationalist –
have served only to confuse the issue further. In order to understand fully
the nature of conversion, whether it was voluntary or coerced, one has to
avoid any form of anachronism. The reasons why these communities were
prompted to convert are diverse, and so any single theory would be prema-
ture at this time.

Religious conversion relates primarily to a collective history, which

embraces social and cultural communities, or, more precisely, members of a lineage, family, a village community or a larger territorial group. An individual converts to Islam or to Christianity because he/she belongs to a social network. Conversion and religious belonging or affiliations are therefore part of a process of socialization through the pursuit of a collective identity. Collective representations and beliefs, rites, customs and ceremonies are considered part of the official religion of a given region, village or family, irrespective of whether a particular cultural trait does or does not form part of this religion. They are categorized collectively as 'an ancestral legacy of traditions and customs'. Belonging to a religion means belonging to a social group. Although the individual may share group prejudices towards other religious groups, the essential group values are defined by a system of kinship and alliance, of solidarity and hostility, status and social position, which seem to be uniform and common to all Albanians (Doja, 1999). Being Muslim or Christian is based on the particular family, kinship or social group, which by tradition relates to religious 'belonging' or adherence. It is not based solely on belief or religious conviction; rather it is grounded in the social culture. Religion is conformity, which spreads throughout a community.

Throughout history, there are examples of conversion and religious identification influencing political and social interaction, by being at the same time in competition *and* in accord with other modes of organized interaction, such as kinship and ethnicity, or being 'Albanian'. However, the concept of collective identity – religious or ethnic – cannot be self-explanatory. In other words, one cannot simply accept that Albanians are Muslims, because of the claim that the majority of Albanians are said to belong to Islam, just as one cannot accept that an Albanian is Muslim or Christian because he may say 'I am Muslim' or 'I am Christian'. The prominence of collective identity in ethnic labelling is evident amongst other possible means of identifying people. It is only when this label is attached, when ethnicity is emphasized by the very act of selecting a label, that cultural behaviour, religious practices and values seem ethnic almost as a matter of course. What is important here is not the question, 'who are the Albanians', whether they are Muslim or Christian, nor to understand the intensity or nature of the religious belief they have. It seems more useful to understand how their religious identity is of use to them, and to understand whether, when, how and why a particular identification may be preferable to another, for example ethnicity as opposed to religious belonging.

The dynamic of fundamental oppositions

The majority of contemporary writers consider the content, as well as the meaning of ethnicity, as open to change and redefinition. Since Fredrik Barth first wrote about the anthropology of ethnicity in 1969, it has become

accepted practice to focus on the analysis of the foundation and mainten-
ance of ethnic boundaries rather than the cultural characteristics of any
particular group. However, this only allows for the social effects of cultural
difference, and does not prove that ethnic identities can be organized,
negotiated or manipulated independently of the cultural content which is
associated with them. It simply means that the social anthropologist, follow-
ing the example of Radcliffe-Brown, considers that relevant anthropologi-
cal comparisons focus on social relationships, which have established
themselves through the allocation of roles and status, and not on cultural
symbols, which are only *the dress,* according to Leach's formula. What is
important in the analysis of collective identity is not therefore any cultural
content or specific religious affiliation of a particular group, but rather the
process of codifying their differences, which makes the various categories
organizationally relevant. The collective identities are only applicable in
reference to an 'otherness', which points to the organization of dichot-
omous groupings between 'we' and 'others'. These identities can only be
realized on the boundary of 'we', in contact or confrontation with, or in
contrast to, 'others'. What accounts for the continuing existence of these
groups is therefore the existence of ethnic boundaries, independently of
any changes affecting the rules and markers they adhere to. So clarification
of the nature of identity and of identification processes complies with a gen-
erative analysis of the foundation, maintenance and transformation of
boundaries between groups.

   A historical and ethnographic summary of how Albanian social com-
munities function, which I shall try to develop elsewhere, shows that social
divisions such as religious conversion were – and still are – simply a poss-
ible means of negotiating and redefining social identities. In these circum-
stances, one should explore whether the transfer and re-transfer of political
and religious power, along with the conversions which would necessarily
accompany this, have led to a progressive and increasingly reinforced con-
formity of a nominally converted population with the rules of the adopted
religion in question.[1] Successive conversions can, on the contrary, suggest
a weakening of religious sentiment in the population, in spite of the politi-
cal and mediatory efforts of both the religious leaders and their followers.
If one wants to study the role or the function that religion plays in society,
with people as constructors of symbolic worlds, one has to look for, if not
the laws, then at least the general processes, such as the re-adjustment or
balancing of the religious life in relation to other aspects of communal life
when the disparities are too great, or the transfer of religious meaning from
one domain to an entirely different one.

   All religions are at some time obliged to confront earlier or coexistent
religious traditions, which they attempt to combat or to assimilate. This
often produces hierarchical levels within spiritual conceptions. Apart from
movements of religious conversion or contest for spiritual reform, a further
example may perhaps be seen in the beliefs and superstitious practices

which were denounced by the Christian Church and which constituted what in social anthropology is normally termed 'popular religion'. The concept of popular religion is significant in societies in which the religious authorities maintain strong principles of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Popular religion is, therefore, a 'lived' religion in terms of representations and customs, which may be different to the official religion. It derives from practices such as sorcery, which were violently opposed by the religious authorities, and even beliefs and customs which were largely integrated into the official religious system, such as the cult of the 'healer' saint, which has maintained its importance amongst popular healing treatments in Catholic countries. As orthodox authority condemns these traditions, so they change in character in relation to accepted practice, but often maintain their form and content. So we should be asking to what extent these traditions already had a certain autonomy and meaning other than the dogmatic interpretation of them by theologians.

Popular religion has always had a strong presence amongst Albanians and other Southeast European populations, although it has often been misinterpreted. Notably, its characteristics have rarely been regarded as deriving from traditions of resistance to more modern forms of religious life. In sociological terms, the perspective of popular religion commonly refers either to a cosmological religiosity or to religious characteristics based on modes of sociality in social and cultural communities such as the patriarchal family, the isolated village, networks of feudal allegiance and so on. Nonetheless, wherever a historic religion moves to suppress popular or ancient religions, the cultural exchange very often produces syncretic phenomena, where groups of representations and practices combine to form an original belief system, and its meanings are then imposed accordingly. Where this syncretism occurs, it is often difficult to identify either the official religion, be it Christianity or Islam, or the popular religion.

Religious phenomena derive from two separate processes – interiorization and exteriorization, which at the same time complement *and* oppose each other. No religion can be purely interiorized nor exteriorized, nor can it be purely practice, neither evolving from the inside nor imposed from without. If it were, in Hegelian terms, religion would then not only be this exteriorization of the absolute in the senses and in history, but also the point at which representation ceases to exist. There is without doubt also a point beyond which the process of interiorization cannot proceed further, for example the point at which religion becomes purely individual. What the Church called 'superstitious practices', as observed also by Nicole Belmont (1979), was also a far more active form of social integration than the opposing movement of interiorization, which the Church favoured. In fact, the process of interiorization enfeebles religion more than the opposite process of projection and objectification, which can only be collective.

From a similar perspective, which also meets the structural hypothesis developed by Leach (1973), if absolute individuation occurs in divine conception, religion can lose all 'social' character, pushing to the extreme the hierarchy of the system of mediation. It is at that point that communication breaks down and, as a result, religion is dissolved. Religious power therefore invests itself with supreme political power, leaving only two possible alternatives: recourse to millenarianism with the intention of reversing the established order, or the exclusive adoption of the popular religion and, in certain cases, to religious conversion. These are the only possible spiritual escapes, which aim to displace repressed dispositions in the external world. This is an example of how divine hierarchical organization institutes equality in human society, as well as how making divine mediation more accessible appropriates the dominant authority.

In the context of this theory, which I have tried to expand elsewhere (Doja, 2000), I would like to point out that the opposition between orthodoxy and subversion, interiorization and objectification, official religion and popular religion, dominant religion and dominated religion, has mostly been considered a difficult, if not impossible, issue to resolve. This is particularly the case in Albania and other Southeast European societies, where there has been cultural discontinuity. It is very probable that ancestral paganism and institutional religion, and polytheism and monotheism, have actually evolved in tandem, maintaining a sense of mutual tolerance, even perhaps of complicity, until the absolute affirmation of authority and orthodoxy opened the way to millenarianism, to schism and to conversion. This then became a turning point and this twofold oppositional movement of religiosity, perceived as hostile, formed a social and moral divide.

The dominant elite and foreign powers attempted to impose a greater interiorization of religion by the strict control of the processes of exteriorization, in other words by imposing a formal liturgy and worship on people considered to be uneducated. These people were therefore in need of beliefs and practices which would more adequately reflect their ways and basic needs, and thus of mechanisms of projection suitable to them, and developed by them, by which they could express a subconscious knowledge collectively and socially, which might have been censored by the educated, foreign and dominant culture. And from this pattern, one can see that conversion reflects more particularly the irreducible ambiguity of human reality. On the one hand, it testifies to the expression and exteriorization of a person's freedom, capable of totally transforming himself by reinterpreting his past and his future. On the other hand, it reveals that this transformation of human reality is brought about by external forces, whether that would be divine grace or psychosocial constraint.

Apart from historical factors (crisis, destructuration, economic and social pressure) which have promoted religious conversion and reconversion amongst Albanians and Southeast European populations, other factors have also played an important role – notably the existence within

these populations of a denominational hierarchy on the one hand, and of mythologies and popular religions on the other, which constructed their sociocultural universe around hierarchical founding divine figures. The syncretism of these conversions did not bring about a rupture in the order of religious ideas. Rather, it inscribed itself in the fabric of a regular movement of return to both political and religious foundations.

Emphasizing the symbolic or emblematic aspects of conversion as strategies of adaptation and affirmation, and not as static cultural traits, should not exclude them from analysis. For a group, establishing its distinctiveness is to define a principle of enclosure, and to erect and maintain a boundary between itself and others. All conversions, religious or political, are twofold. They become an adaptation and an introjection into the substrata of the popular religion, as well as a subversion directed against the political and religious power of the elite or foreign governments. The strategies of identification and opposition are, however, exteriorized across a limited number of cultural traits, amongst which one finds not only popular religion and culture but also the exteriorized characteristics of religious conversion. It is precisely in the projection of these cultural traits as an *interior* marker of a group that we see how these boundaries, which form the social organization of ethnic groups, are maintained.

Religious projections and affirmation of national ideologies

A group can adopt the cultural traits of another group, such as its language or its religion, and can still continue to be perceived, and to perceive itself, as distinctive. In several cases, religious conversion, or changing the ethnic label, can be a means of reinforcing the internal solidarity of the group, and its external differentiation from other groups. Many examples show that the strength of an ethnic boundary can remain constant throughout time, despite – and sometimes by means of – internal cultural changes. Notably, Albanians have been able to modify and change their religious culture without losing their identity. Historically, maintaining their collective identity and their ethnic boundaries with neighbouring groups has not depended on the permanence of their religious affiliations. Nevertheless, religions in general, and religious conversion in particular, must have been of relatively great importance, at least during the lengthy medieval period, at times to the same extent as their ethnic label or their common language.

Conversion to Christianity for example has a very ancient history in Albania, which was spread directly from the teaching of St Paul himself: 'and by the power of the Spirit of God. And so, in traveling all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum, I have proclaimed fully the good news [about Christ]' (Rom XV:19). The country had received its first missionaries from Rome quite early, which is corroborated further by the fact that Albanians

have generally tended to borrow ecclesiastical terminology directly from the Latin. Albanian, the one survivor of the Illyrian languages, contains not only a huge number of words borrowed from Latin, but also fundamental matters of grammar and syntax, a number of special idioms, and notably a core vocabulary of words connected with religious life and church activity (Haarmann, 1972). Some of the Albanian borrowings are from the very earliest Latin. This indicates that Albanians adhered early to Latin civilization and they kept close contact throughout the Roman period.

The Albanians were effectively under the jurisdiction of Rome until 731 when Illyricum was placed under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Within the Byzantine Empire Albanian Christians entered further into the orbit of Eastern Christianity. On account of the geographical position of their country and for various other political and historical reasons, they found themselves obliged, in the course of time, to vacillate between the two Churches. However, they yet managed to keep alive their Western background, and perhaps they never completely severed their ties with Rome.[2]

It is precisely Christianity, with its firmly established Greek and Latin elements, which strengthened the ethnolinguistic identity of the Illyric-Albanian population, deeply involved in the profound social, territorial and demographic transformations and migrations of the age. Notably, this has meant that Albanians, in the same way as Greeks, were not swept away by the influx of barbarians and Slavs. Later, after the Slavs had adopted Eastern Orthodox Christianity, certain descent and territorial groups in northern Albania did not hesitate to re-convert to Roman Catholicism as another form of resistance to Slav pressure.

It was during this lengthy medieval period that Albanians also assumed the ethnic label by which they are still known today. On the basis of testimony from Ptolemy (III:13) in the second century, and from a series of Byzantine and western historical sources in the Middle Ages, it is accepted that the ethnic label for Albanians, *Arb-ër, Arb-ën, Arb-ën-esh,* very likely first indicated a region or a part of the population situated in central Albania. Its geographical usage extended progressively until about the 13th–14th centuries, with the first evidence of fairly important political formations. Before Scanderbeg's time, it was already in widespread usage throughout the country, developing from the name of a region or a part of a population into an ethnic label, which denoted the whole of the population. This ancient former name, with its forms in *arb-* and *alb-* deriving from an Indo-European source, close to the Latin *arvum,* 'arable field', and equivalent terms in other Indo-European languages (Çabej, 1972), is preserved not only in the Albanian diasporas, but also in Albania itself, from the north to the south, as is evidenced in the toponymic factors and certain particular usages in the whole of the Albanian linguistic area. Throughout the Middle Ages, Albanians were known by the identical term – *Alb-an-*ian – that they are still known by today by neighbouring and foreign populations.

From a historical perspective, like the conversion to Christianity, the

Albanians' acceptance of Islam was probably facilitated by their desire to preserve their identity boundaries. Affirmation in Islam could be interpreted as a form of resistance to pressure from Slav and Greek influences across their Orthodox Churches. As regards Islamization, the role played by the Balkan Churches has received very little attention, although the pressure exerted by these Churches against one another has often been stressed with respect to other matters. In this way, the Church inadvertently became an agent of Islamic conversion by provoking movements of resistance, which found refuge under the banner of Islam. Given that the Ottomans were at some distance, the principal enemies of the Albanians were their Greek and Slav neighbours (Kaleshi, 1975). Being evangelized by Roman missionaries, the Albanians did not have a national church of their own similar to that of the Slavs. Thus, pressed by the Greeks in the south and by the Slavs elsewhere, their conversion to Islam seems to have been a way of preserving their national identity (Juka, 1984).

In the 16th century, the Ottoman authorities had effectively allowed the Serbian Patriarch to place the Albanian Catholics under his jurisdiction. In 1664, Andre Bogdani, the Albanian Archbishop of Scopia, informed his congregation in Rome that Albanian Catholics were persecuted much more by the Orthodox Church than by the Ottoman regime (Krasniqi, 1979: 291–391). With regard to the Turkish registers related to Peja City, it is significant that Peja's population, still mostly Christian in 1483, had turned overwhelmingly Moslem (90 percent) by 1582 (Ternava, 1979: 60). This happened at a time when the Patriarch of Peja was granted power by the Porte (1557) thanks to the efforts of the Serbian-born Grand Vizir Sokolovic, whose brother or uncle was an Orthodox ecclesiastic. Albanian scholars regard these conversions as a clear indication that Peja's population was Albanian. If the population of that city had been Slav, the numerous conversions at the very epoch when the patriarch was granted power by the Porte would have no rationale and would be incomprehensible. Juka (1984) maintains, furthermore, that these conversions were, for the Albanians, a means of keeping their ethnic identity.

Faced with other neighbouring groups who were threatening them, conversion allowed Albanians to take refuge in their new religious identity, which was totally resistant to Slav and Greek cultures. The current historiography in Albania maintains – and not without reason – that the extended period of Ottoman domination was characterized by obscurantism and barbarism. However, one must also accept that Islamic conversion had to safeguard Albanian ethnic identity against foreign assimilation, which had been the role of Christian conversion in ancient times and during the Middle Ages. The Albanian scholar and diplomat Faik Konitza (1957) pointed out that the Albanians are fully aware that the conversions are the cause of many of their grievances and misfortunes, while remaining at the same time perfectly conscious that, between the two alternatives, they had no choice. If they had remained Christians, they would have been absorbed by their

neighbours. So their turning to Islam could be described, not as an act of weakness, but as a final gesture of defiance against the Slav and Greek Christian pressure.

It is significant that the only other Southeast European country to acquire a Muslim majority was Bosnia, which had also been an area of competition between Christian Catholic and Orthodox Churches. It seems probable that Bosnians also felt obliged to convert to Islam, in order to defend themselves against the risk of assimilation by their more powerful neighbours. When examining the Bosnian problem, many modern scholars (see Dzaja, 1978, 1984) have pertinently indicated that the Bosnians, situated as they are, between Orthodox Serbia and Catholic Croatia, found themselves torn by disputes between the two Churches, and they were compelled first to have recourse to heretical and schismatic practices, and, after the Turkish conquest, to embrace Islam.

The schismatic Bosnian Church (see Fine, 1975; Dragojlovic, 1987) seems to have fallen away from the Catholic Church in the 13th century, and to have operated on its own in Bosnia until the coming of the Franciscans, who tried to reassert the authority of Rome, in the 1340s. Thereafter the Bosnian Church competed against the Roman Catholic Church for a century, and enjoyed relative autonomy from the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. But it was subsequently harshly persecuted, when its functionaries were either expelled or forcibly converted to Catholicism on the eve of the Turkish conquest. Throughout the lifetime of this Church, papal writers accused Bosnians of heresy; and some of these sources identify the heresy as dualist or Manichean. Because of these accusations, the Bosnian Church has traditionally been identified as a late embodiment of an earlier Southeast European Manichean sect, the Bogomils of Bulgaria.[3]

Whether the adherents of the schismatic Bosnian Church of the Middle Ages could be directly affiliated with the Bogomil and Cathar heretics, followed a dualist and Manichean theology or not, or whether they were called 'Bogomils', 'Patarins' or just 'Krstjanin', all this is a matter of fruitless scholasticist controversy amongst 'heresiologists'. More important seems to be the schismatic, rather informal character of this Church, its hierarchical and monastic internal organization, the relations with Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Church politics of the rulers of Bosnia, and the proportions of the Bosnian population affected by heresy. All these matters and others, which I shall try to develop elsewhere, obviously suggest an interpretation of the conversion to Islam of a large part of the Bosnian population under the Ottoman Turks as a mass-conversion of 'schismatics' or 'heretics' who, having held out for centuries against the competition and/or persecution of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, finally preferred to transfer their allegiance to Islam. In this way, before Islamic conversion, the schismatic heritage of the membership of an authentically and peculiarly Bosnian Church must have succeeded in constructing a necessary boundary for the distinction of a collective Bosnian identity. If this

were not the case, it would not be possible to explain the expression of this ethnic identity following religious conversion.

Anthropologists carrying out fieldwork in the region since the beginning of the century have observed forms of affinities between Bosnian religious practices and those among Montenegrin and Albanian lineages (Durham, 1910: 454–6). The Albanian scholar Dhimiter S. Shuteriqi (1974: 24–6) has expressed the opinion that the Albanians might also, like the Bosnians, have been influenced by Bogomil heresy. However, in spite of a group of Cathars known as *Albanenses* in Italy, there are no extant documents to support this conjecture with incontrovertible evidence.

Certainly, the period of Ottoman invasion is marked by profound social and cultural changes in Southeast Europe, which were inevitably reflected in strategies of identity formation and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. If religious conversion appears to be primarily a process whereby individuals cross ethnic boundaries, it in fact only proves that these boundaries are not in themselves barriers and that they are never occlusive. Rather, it proves that they are mostly fluid, changing and permeable. In this context, religious conversion does not then necessarily challenge the ethnic significance of boundaries. Conversion did not challenge the boundaries between Albanians and Ottomans, for example. On the contrary, it effectively prevented the emergence of an intermediary category, and, in doing so, kept the boundary between the two groups intact, by categorizing individual Islamic converts as Albanian.

Maintaining a principle of identification which included Albanians in the same category independently of religious conversion was probably facilitated by the adoption of a different and more significant identifier. During this period, if a relatively great number of Albanians changed their religion, they also adopted a new ethnic label. From the fact that their contemporary ethnic label, *Shqip-tar*, and land name, *Shqip-ëri, Shqip-ni*, are not known in the Albanian colonies of Italy and Greece, it can be concluded that they were not used, or at least were not generally known, before the Ottoman invasion. Descendants of Albanian émigrés during the first wars against the Ottomans in the 15th and 16th centuries, Albanians of southern Italy and of Sicily normally used the former ethnic name in order to distinguish themselves ethnically and to designate generally the population of their former land. This same label is still used today by the descendants of Albanians who immigrated to Greece a little earlier, around the 14th and 15th centuries.

I would argue that the change in the Albanian ethnic label results from the social and cultural transformations which took place throughout the centuries following the Ottoman invasion, probably in order to stabilize the characteristics of conversion by giving then a meaning other than that of religious identification. Eqrem Çabej (1972), although unable to trace the reasons for this change, states however that the root of the new ethnic label for Albanians, *shqip*, indicates from the outset the 'spoken language' of

*Arb-an-*ians and that this 'language' label was probably of very ancient usage, perhaps parallel to the usage of the old ethnic label, since they both appear regularly later in the 16th century among the first examples of Albanian writing.[4] Usage of the new word as ethnic label was consolidated at the beginning of the 18th century. In the provincial Council documents from 1706, it appeared for the first time as ethnic label next to the old label in the expression *gjuhë e Shqipëtarëvet,* 'language of the Albanians'. It is interesting to note that the first usage of the new ethnic label is documented in relation to the spoken language.

After Islamic conversion, other phenomena played a relatively important role in maintaining the Albanian collective identity and ethnic boundaries, notably the coexistence of two very different forms of Islam. On one side, Sunni Islam merged with the state government. Religious supervision by the ecclesiastical authorities was reinforced by the leadership of the Sultan himself in the role of Caliph, who would send *firmans* – for example in 1842 – on specifically religious matters, such as observing prayer. The mosque was a place preserved for communications of the state and all the imperial decrees were read there. On the other side, amongst the ideologically opposed Shiite and Sufi movements, one must note the existence of the Bektashi Order *(Bektâchîyya)*, which was a religious Muslim brotherhood, and, at the same time, an initiatory sect derived from duodecimal shiism, which spread during the 14th–16th centuries from the Caspian Sea in Anatolia. The Bektashi enjoyed a certain political importance in the Ottoman Empire. They had effectively succeeded in establishing a close relationship with the Janissaries, whom they constantly encouraged and dominated by traditionally providing their religious guides. In the face of economic, social and ideological upheaval, the most radical mystics adopted an attitude symptomatic of rupture and, when the Janissaries revolted in 1826, and were subsequently put down by force, the Bektashi immigrated to Albanian territory, which became their favoured centre.

Muslim religious brotherhoods have contributed to the maintenance of local particularisms, which are still observed today. It is significant to note that the Albanian Bektashi ceased to be considered as conventional Islam adherents and were regarded rather as an independent denomination. It is not difficult to explain how Bektashism spread so extensively amongst Albanians. If the Janissaries and the Bektashi Order were to be formally abolished, the abolition could only be effective in Istanbul and in the provinces where the central Ottoman administration had a direct authority and power, whereas Albanians remained outside these territories. The authority of the central Ottoman administration was already completely insignificant in the Albanian area during this period and the Bektashi continued to live there undisturbed. According to Filipovic (1954), Bektashism probably did much to create and preserve this remarkable religious tolerance so particular to Albanians. The important fact is that Bektashism was almost

always accepted as one of the most authentic, though often idealized, embodiments of the Albanian 'spirit'.[5]

During the difficult history of their national affirmation, it is exactly in the same spirit that a great number of Albanian Muslims have, despite their 'divided loyalty' (Skendi, 1967: 469–70), often firmly expressed the desire to sever links with the Ottoman Empire. Above all, the political position of the Bektashi is particularly revealing. They adopted without reserve the idea of national independence. Their traditionally difficult relationships with the religious and political authorities in the Bosphorus certainly contributed to this, but so did their characteristic openness with regard to contemporary sensibility and new ideas (Morozzo della Rocca, 1987: 41). Naîm Frashëri, one of the most eminent representatives of both the Bektashi and the Albanian national movement, openly suggested the possibility of a reconciliation of the national idea and religion (Xholi, 1965; Bartl, 1968).

Ottoman 'tolerance', based on the system of '*millet*', which must be contextualized in terms of time and space, allowed the conservation of different ideologies and religious practices in Southeast Europe.[6] It structured an awareness of ethnolinguistic groups which, by a gradual development in language and religion, succeeded in establishing a kind of protonationalism, the first evidence of which dates from the 18th century. In this way, a dialectic forged itself for centuries between ethnolinguistic groups and religious denominations, which would be at the heart of national identities. History has imposed on Southeast European peoples this specific linguistic and religious factor in movements of national construction, as well as in the development and survival of their cultures.

In this context, historical evidence has shown the hugely relevant role of language – to the detriment of religion – in the formation of the modern Albanian nation. The division of Albanians between their religious affiliations – Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic – resulted in their being categorized as either Turkish, Greek or Latin – and their own identity was considered of lesser importance, largely ignored by European powers. Therefore, language became even more important for Albanians, because they constituted the only 'trans-religious' people in the Balkans, whose identity may be exclusively categorized on the basis of language. In this case, then, it is therefore language itself which has been ethnicized, and not religion, to the extent that, in the same way as religion, it has transformed itself into a real ideology – henceforth called *shqiptaria*, 'Albanity'.

The external differences with neighbouring groups only contributed to ethnic differentiation amongst Albanians when they were seen as identifiers of an interiorized affiliation. In spite of the energetic assertions of primordialists, ethnic identity, like the concept of nation, is not a concrete reality, nor is it a directly observable phenomenon. As writers since Weber have noted, what distinguishes ethnic identity from other forms of collective religious or political identity is its orientation towards the past and using Ronald Cohen's formula with an 'aura of descent'. Even when acquired by

assimilation, diacritical markers are quickly incorporated into the micro-culture of individuals and families as part of their own heritage and iden-tity. Once acquired, by whatever process, such identity is then passed down the generations for as long as the grouping has some viable significance to members and non-members (Cohen, 1978: 387). As Weber stated, it is not the 'fact of community' (*Gemeinschaft*), with a real common origin and exist-ence, but the 'belief in community' (*Gemeinschaftsglaube*), as it is developed artificially in many social groupings, that constitutes the characteristic trait of ethnicity. Anthony Smith (1981: 65) emphasizes that this belief in common origin justifies and reinforces the other dimensions or signs of identity, and therefore the very sense of the unicity of the group.

In other words, it is the belief in a common origin and the *loyalty* to a principle of identification which have introjected and naturalized other attributes of Albanians – language and territorial occupation – which are now perceived as essential and unchanging traits of their identity, rather than their religious affiliations, which are organized and manipulated according to a given situation. The importance of language in defining Albanians as an ethnic group is relevant, not simply in order to establish a criterion of definition, but as a resource organized to create and maintain the myth of common origin. Although it is easier to employ a cultural attribute such as language in this way, it does not mean that language can be credited with a universal and essential validity in ethnic identification. Speaking the same language, territorial proximity or similarity in customs do not in themselves represent ethnic attributes, which they only become when they are used as *exteriorizing* and *projecting* identitifiers of represen-tation and identification by those who claim a common origin of affiliation. For the Albanians of Italy and Greece, it is the territory of origin which now constitutes a permanently available resource, even if the cultural and lin-guistic similarities have almost completely disappeared.

The concept of a common identity of origin should be considered in conjunction with common cultural traits, not – as in the classic anthropo-logical approach – in order to establish the importance of processes of socialization in the reproduction of ethnic groups (Isajiw, 1974), but in order to recognize the processes of *interiorization* of qualities and attributes, naturalized by a mythical history. Ethnic groups do not constitute an unchanging reality, and can only develop and preserve themselves by assuming a sedimented history. Articulation of two concepts, borrowed from Aristotle, emplotment (*muthos*) and mimetic activity (*mimèsis*), allowed Ricœur to highlight 'the creative imitation, by means of the plot of lived temporal experience' (1984: 31). Notably, acknowledging the mythical complex by which historical events are *mis en intrigue*, 'emplotted', and connected and organized as processes which happened to 'imitating' or 'representing' events, can help to explain the paradox of '[including] cultures in the past which would clearly be excluded in the present because of differences in form' (Barth, 1969: 12).

This dilemma disappears if one accepts that ethnic groups have the capacity to maintain their identity, not in an unchangeable form, but in the form of a creative *loyalty* in relation to the founding events which placed them in time. The point of origin of these founding events can be to a greater or lesser extent moved back in time. Continuity with the past can always be established in the articulation of time and narrative, in the sense of Ricœur (1984), by those creative processes, which regain historical heritage from the past in order to transform it into symbolic capital in the present. Therefore, to the extent of this articulation, the 'invention of tradition' (see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) might as well as normally happened. The strength of these creative processes lies in presenting and organizing the past as a resource, which modifies the contingencies of the present, so that they seem to be a natural destiny.

Since ethnic and national identity is constituted only in terms of the sentiments attributed to it and the attitudes it creates, one has to see in it an idea, a representation, which individuals have made from their collective being, that is to say, definitively, a myth. So this myth is forged through the same mechanisms of projection and subversion, which are found in all other ideologies, of which religion is only one form of articulation. What should straightaway be emphasized is that collective identity, ethnic or national, takes root within differences. Cohesion and solidarity are acquired by dint of an obvious or virtual opposition to all outsiders and strangers.

The articulation of Albanian culture did not emerge until Albanians found themselves exposed to the growing influence of the dominant culture and recognized the necessity of defining and maintaining their own boundaries, and of denying other groups – particularly Serbs and Greeks – access to 'Albanian' values and behaviours. On the other hand, the Albanian nation, one of the last nationalities to appear in Europe, was for a long time characterized by traits which were perceived as archaic, such as their partially 'tribal' organization, the emphasis on familial communities and the use of vendetta. Conversely, their immediate neighbours and the majority of Western travellers, from the middle of the 19th century until the 1930s, sought to 'naturalize' these characteristics in order to make them the very essence of these people. It was not only a question of a customary culture, but a culture which was also suppressed, marginalized and excluded from ordinary ways of development. Albanians found themselves rejected by successive states of increasing influence, and could only affirm themselves by emphasizing the most conventional aspects of their culture. They accorded themselves the ethnic exclusivity of what could be the sign of a gap, the restriction effect of a repressed need to assert and to project into the exterior world the ideological forms, religious or national, of their cultural values. Often perceived unfavourably by their immediate neighbours, they attempted in turn to cultivate particularisms and distinctive identity, and to pose themselves in opposition to them. This allowed them to resist assimilation by another strategy of displacement and subversion,

through conservation and a kind of 'hibernation in history', projecting the ideology of their collective, ethnic and national identity. It is not surprising that, beyond that, the same dialectic is also articulated through conversion practice and religious ideology.

Conclusion

For Albanians, seeking to reinterpret religion in relation to local values, successive conversion and re-conversion took the place of displacement and projection, as well as messianic and millenarist issues. Conversion allowed them to go beyond oppositions between monotheism and polytheism (or paganism, popular religion or a hierarchical conception of the divine), by placing religion at the point where it meets politics: where world beliefs, mythologies and representations form an ideological structure from which society can be deemed a harmonious totality. Their syncretism implies not the merging of two systems of religion, but the appropriation of a new component, which favours a holistic vision of society over individualistic ideology where religious orthodoxy is uppermost. This does not mean that Albanians were particularly religious, *attached* to any one religion, but that religious culture, *faithfully* practised, becomes a compelling part of a collective identity, which is best expressed in this way. Religious conversion and national affirmation are original and coherent movements. Their appearance is, I therefore argue, an imaginary response to a cultural situation severely affected by the brutal and harrowing intrusion of ideological, political and foreign domination.

Notes

1   Conversion is of twofold interest: the nominal conversion from other religions, and the progressive conformity of religious and social practices in nominally converted populations to the injunctions of Islam (Levtzion, 1979). In sociological terms, conversion represents a wrench from a determined social milieu and an adherence to a new association. In this context, conversion can assume

the nature of crisis, and that, in part, explains the upheaval of personality which results from it. The reshaping of the conscience is indissolubly linked to a reshaping of the environment (*Umwelt*). In general, this passage from one community to another is accompanied by moral doubts and difficulties of adaptation and understanding. It therefore took several generations for a population to go from nominal conversion to the full enforcement of practices and essential principles of the new religion.

2   Juka (1984) also found it interesting to indicate that the Albanians who settled in Italy following the Ottoman invasion, many of whom still use the Eastern rite, were never required to sign any document proclaiming their union with the Vatican as is the case with other Eastern communities, nor did they abjure Orthodoxy. On account of this fact, the Albanians of Italy should not be called *uniates* as this presupposes that their links with Rome had never been broken.

3   Bogomilism appeared in Bulgaria in the 10th century and had spread in subsequent centuries into the Byzantine Empire and other areas of Southeastern Europe, including Macedonia and part of Serbia, as well as in medieval Europe, northern Italy and southern France. Preaching a Manichean dualist theology, the Bogomil movement is followed by dissatisfied adherents of all orders, who voluntarily adopt a doctrine, which attacks those in power. Their opposition is always directed against the Church. They fear a return to the primitive source of Christianity, they reject a materially wealthy Church, and this provokes a movement of ideas and an identical mode of behaviour. In Western Europe, the Cathar movement was born as result of this religious fervour in very different milieus during the period between the 11th and 13th centuries, urgently representing projection and spiritual reform. In Southeast Europe, it is within Islam that these movements have found the ultimate expression of their oppositional and contesting projection.

4   National discourse has, however, adopted another theory – on the whole generalized from historical studies, and also by public opinion and literary and cultural movements – that the new ethnic label derived from the name of the eagle (*shqipe*) and that Albanians adopted the eagle as a national symbol during Scanderbeg's time, the eagle being the emblem of his family coat of arms. But if one keeps strictly to the morphology of the words, this theory does not stand up. Written *shqip* to denote the 'language', as Eqrem Çabej (1972) noted, for ancient Albanian authors this word is clearly distinguished from the word for 'eagle' they regularly spell *shqipe*, which shows we are dealing here with two different words.

5   'Bektashism is clearly defined within Albanian religion – strictly speaking it is neither Muslim nor Christian. It represents a denomination which adapts itself easily to the national and patriarchal sentiments of the Albanian race, and to the traditions and customs of the local population' (Baldacci, 1929: 300–1).

6   Within the Ottoman Empire, the system of '*millet*' permitted non-Muslims their faith and culture. For example, the Greek patriarch at the head of the Orthodox population would organize the collection of taxes for the Sultan, but also for the Greek Church, with which all Orthodox adherents were merged, irrespective of ethnolinguistic and cultural identity. This system rooted the denominational hierarchies and sociocultural identities in some way, and the only escape from them was religious conversion. However, from the *khatt-I cherif* of Gülkhâne (1839), the political and administrative bodies of the Ottoman Empire, now at their apogee, excluded Islamic conversion from all socioreli-

gious strategies for Southeast European populations. Following the reforms of Tanzîmât, all subjects of the empire were proclaimed equal before the law, without discrimination in relation to religion.

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