“This is our little hajj”:

Muslim holy sites and reappropriation of the sacred landscape in contemporary Bosnia

ABSTRACT

Bosnian Muslims’ understandings of Islam and relationships with the sacred landscape have undergone significant transformations since the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. I explore these transformations as I analyze discourses and debates on what constitutes “correct” Islamic tradition in Bosnia today, when Muslim practice has been exposed to a global Islamic orthodoxy and entangled in new supraregional hierarchies of power, values, and moral imagination. I specifically focus on how intracommunal Muslim politics intertwines with contemporary Bosnian Muslim shrine pilgrimages. [Bosnia-Herzegovina, Islam, Muslim politics, pilgrimage, postsocialism, sacred sites]

In summer 2009, I was traveling by bus from the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, when a billboard caught my attention. It was advertising the 499th Ajvatovica pilgrimage as one of the largest Muslim gatherings in Europe. Neither the anniversary nor the advertisement itself intrigued me so much as the red-colored graffiti sprayed across the bottom of the billboard: “The biggest heretic religious feast.” For a while, my imagination was haunted by images of ethnoreligious conflict, which has been recurring in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina through the (ethno)politics of the sacred. After my return to the mountains where I had been conducting fieldwork in Muslim villages, I mentioned what I had seen to my friends as well as to a group of dervishes with whom I also worked. They all understood the graffiti differently than I had and immediately provided me with another interpretative framework: “Eh, Wahabis!” I was told.

This episode illustrates ambiguities in contemporary Bosnian Muslim politics over sacred authority. It exemplifies how Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina have responded to transformations in the religious landscape over the past two decades, following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war. The postsocialist liberation of religious expression and conduct after several decades of suppression and control, as well as postwar ethnonational identity rhetoric and the proliferation of international Islamic humanitarian organizations in the country, opened public debates about the authenticity of Bosnian Islam—about what it means to live a Muslim life. Special attention has been paid to discourses on renewed Bosniak traditions and to Muslim holy sites such as Ajvatovica, in particular.

In many of these debates as well as in intimate conversations I had with Bosnian Muslims of different walks of life, sacred sites are apprehended as expressions either of an authentic Bosnian Islam or of parochial non-modern religious conduct or of a syncretic and thus un-Islamic faith that should be abandoned. These debates are shaped by changing ideas and understandings of what constitutes “correct” Muslim conduct and Islamic tradition “after socialism” (e.g., Hann 2006),
when Bosnian Muslim practice was exposed to a global
Islamic orthodoxy and ethnoreligious ideology and ent-
tangled in new national and international hierarchies of
power, values, and moral imagination. However, such de-
bate are not in any way exceptionally Bosnian but are
part of the social dynamics of many Muslim societies
today and of broader ongoing debates on Muslim polit-
ics within those societies (Eickelman and Piscatory 1996;
Hefner 2005).

In this article, I discuss how these transformations
in Muslim politics intertwine with sacred landscapes in
Muslim Bosnia after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia.
My analysis is informed by two bodies of scholarship.
Firstly, I document the complex nature and choreography
of Bosnian Muslims’ relations with holy sites in the con-
text of debates on sacred landscapes in the Balkans and
the Mediterranean (e.g., Albera and Couroucli 2012).
Secondly, I show that questioning and exploring what it means
to be a Muslim in Bosnia-Herzegovina is not necessarily
anchored to post-Yugoslav ethnonational identity-building
discourses, as has been argued rather widely in recent years
(e.g., Bougarel 2003; Hayden 2007). Indeed, Bosnian Mus-
lum cultural and social intimacies (Herzfeld 1997) are mul-
tifaceted and often contradictory. To unravel these contra-
dictions, in this article I study intracommunal interactions
and perils of self-alterity among Bosnian Muslims them-
selves in the context of disturbing postsocialist and postwar
changes in religious life and practice. In so doing, I follow
a turn in anthropological studies of Islam based on what
Magnus Marsden succinctly outlines as “a new and differ-
ent understanding of the relationship between Islam, every-
day religious experience and interpersonal relationships in
Muslim societies” (2005:22–23). As the ethnographic mate-
rinal I discuss indicates, Bosnian Muslims’ reflections on the
changing character of sacred landscapes go beyond post-
Yugoslav ethnonational identitarian debates and frames of
reference. These debates often unfold as an expression of
emotionally engaged and complex reasoning about the cre-
ativity, mindfulness (cf. Marsden 2005), and contradic-
tions of Muslim life and practice.

Sacred landscapes in the Balkans disputed

Sacred landscapes in the Balkans have attracted the atten-
tion of many anthropologists in the past two decades (e.g.,
Albera 2008; Bax 1995; Bielenin-Lenczowska 2009; Bowman
2010; Brinda 1995; Dubisch 1995; Duijzers 2000; Hayden
2002). The main analytical theme has been the politics of
the sharing of holy sites by various religious constituencies
(Albera and Couroucli 2012). In particular, scholars have
emphasized how certain holy sites gain a multivocal char-
acter and a capacity to accommodate differences. Hence,
the prevailing scholarly views on Balkan holy sites have
been anchored to a politics of sharing by and difference be-
tween (ethno)religious communities, such as Serbs (Orth-
doxx Christians), Croats (Roman Catholics), Bosniaks (Mus-
lims), and Kosovo Albanians ( Muslims).

Increasingly important in this analysis is the thought-
provoking concept of “antagonistic tolerance” (Hayden
2002). In defining the concept, Robert M. Hayden borrows
from the negative definition of tolerance, as understood
by moral philosophers such as John Locke, framing it as
“passive noninterference and premised on a lack of abili-
ity of . . . [one] group to overcome the other” and as “atti-
dudes of strategic calculation of the value of tolerating oth-
ers” (2002:206, emphasis added). The idea of “antagonistic
tolerance,” hence, interprets the sharing of holy sites as “a
pragmatic adaptation to a situation in which repression of
the other group’s practices may not be possible rather than
an active embrace of the Other” (Hayden 2002:219). In this
approach, the unit of analysis is chiefly an ethnoreligious
“group,” and emphasis is placed on a sociology of inter-
group relations and boundaries in which sharing and dif-
ference, the processes of inclusion and exclusion, and other
contrasting dichotomies are studied as they emerge from
the sharing of holy sites, even as boundaries between the
groups involved endure (see Hayden 2002:207). The idea of
“antagonistic tolerance” accommodates both conflict and
sharing as inevitable modalities in the pragmatics of social
life in a multiethnic fabric. Latent conflict, then, is an in-
herent condition of the processes of making and sharing
sacred sites, and sharing is understood as a temporal mo-
ment expressing actual processual relations rather than a
fixed quality of intergroup status based on long-lasting dif-
ference, antagonism, and pragmatic acceptance (e.g., Hay-
den et al. 2011). This view highlights the continuity and the
profundity of the differences between those who share a
holy site. As Hayden argues, the conviction that “identi-
ties are fluid or changeable does not mean that distinctions
between groups are easily removed” (2002:207).

Hayden, thus, seriously questions the arguments of se-
veral authors that Bosnia has a long history of unpro-
blematic, peaceful, multicultural relations and that the 1990s
war was a betrayal of the Bosnian tradition of tolerance
(e.g., Donia and Fine 1994). However insightful and chal-
denging, such a perspective is somewhat biased toward the
epistemological trap of “groupism,” that is, a tendency to
ascribe agency to entities, such as ethnic groups, that are
taken for granted and considered basic constituents of so-
cial life (cf. Brubaker 2002:164). Groupism can also be found
in Roy E. Hassner’s (2009, 2010) prominent work on shared
sacred spaces. Hassner, for example, asserts that “sacred
places invite conflict with rival groups who strive to com-
pete for access or legitimacy or who simply wish to inflict
harm on their opponents” (2010:149, emphasis added; see
also Bowman 2011:373). As I have argued elsewhere, such
analytical essentialism reduces complex social fabrics to
their ethnonational or collective identitarian dimensions
while overlooking other related processes happening on the ground (Henig 2012; also Sorabji 2008).

Many anthropologists have paid extensive attention in recent years to the danger of essentializing collective identities (Cohen 2000; Werbner 1997). Their discussions suggest that a way out of the trap of essentialism might be through an engaged but still emphatic ethnography that regards any taken-for-granted essence as uncertain, fractured, and ambivalent and yet embedded in historical contingencies and power relations. Therefore, I suggest a perspectival twist from groupism and top-down processes toward grassroots, intersubjectively constructed and negotiated meanings and practices of sharing by divergent social actors. Such a perspective enables movement through various scales—bottom-up, top-down, micro-macro, indivisible-shared, identity-difference—without essentializing the processes of social life. Conflict and sharing, then, need to be analyzed as the results of specific processes and not as proxies for interactions between social actors. Put differently, human sociality by and large entails both compassion and violence, but these ensue from concrete historical and political situations (Jackson 1998) and not from profound and essentialized characteristics ascribed to social “groups” or material objects such as shrines.

Indeed, Dionigi Albera (2008:53–56) concordantly argues for an analytical shift toward a greater complexity and broader scale of continuity in analysis of shared holy sites in the Mediterranean. Continuity might, for example, be studied from the perspective of the pilgrimage site, by tracing the agency of various actors involved in the processes of making the site but without necessarily focusing on its ethnicization. In a similar vein, Glenn Bowman has developed and ethnographically instantiated the issues of agency in relation to holy sites:

The presence of agency necessitates close attention to what people are doing, and what they say they are doing, while they are in the process of doing it. It is vital to attend to who is saying what to whom and who is listening; long-term historical processes are characterized by silencings as well as debates. It is important to examine both if we want to really know what goes on in “sharing.” [2010:198]

Drawing on comparative research of shared holy sites in Palestine and in Macedonia, Bowman (2010:196) points out that no preexisting antagonism serves as foundational logic for intercommunal interactions. Rather, he observes, another dynamic colors these interactions, one that results from contingency, situational factors, and constantly shifting power relations in the process of sharing by multiple social actors. Thus, sharing a holy site might lead to antagonism, tensions, and mixing, or it might not. He concludes, “We must attempt to see what happens on the ground while syncretistic practices are occurring” (2010:199). I am in favor of Bowman’s cautionary note, as it does not impose any proxy for interactions that take place around holy sites. More importantly, though, tracing social actors’ agency in the process of sharing a holy site enables movement through various scales, or a switch in analysis from intercommunal to intracommunal relations and contestations and from a “grouplike” to an actor-oriented analytical perspective, with attention to the contingent aspects of “sharing.”

In the study of sacred landscapes in the Balkans, very little attention has been paid to intracommunal perspectives. In this article, I draw on Bowman’s (2010) arguments and trace parallels with the processes of contestation between Bosnian Muslims themselves over the meanings and sharing of pilgrimage sites and over appropriation of the sacred landscape to shed light on intracommunal interactions and relations among Bosnian Muslims more generally. Specifically, I am concerned with pilgrimage sites, and I trace the agency of various actors assembled around holy sites in the mountains of central Bosnia. In doing so, I also attend to the local conversations of various Muslims in the mountains, tracing “who is saying what to whom and who is listening.” This perspective on the forms of sociality, identities, and performances pilgrimage sites entail is akin to Victor and Edith Turner’s (see Turner 1974; Turner and Turner 1978) approach to understanding the pilgrimage and veneration of sacred sites as a process. My discussion here nuances the Turners’ idea of antistructural communitas as an emergent social form during the pilgrimage. I argue that a pilgrimage process might generate or strengthen structural differences or conflict or both and thus multiply the detachment or proximity of actors we conventionally subsume within a social form of antistructural communitas (Turner 1974:266–269). In so arguing, I follow Gerd Baumann’s subversive reading of Emile Durkheim and Durkheimian perspectives on ritual actions. Baumann (1992:99) indicates that ritual may be performed by competing constituencies, can serve to negotiate the differing relationships of its participants, and may also speak to aspirations toward cultural change. Therefore, I analyze sites of Bosnian Muslim pilgrimage, understood as the ritual action of visitation and worship, as “contested places” (cf. Eade and Sallnow 1991) where Muslims’ self-expressions and belonging as well as Muslim politics compete and are negotiated, enacted, and experienced.

(Bosnian) Muslim politics

Dale E Eickelman and James Piscatory understand Muslim politics as a process of “competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them” (1996:5). Similarly, though more broadly, Talal Asad
(1986:7, 14ff.) argues that an analysis of Islam and Muslim societies ought to be approached as a study of discursive tradition in which particular ideas compete over authorizing “correct” Islam, orthodox practice as well as moral conduct. In other words, as Asad (1993) suggests, anthropology needs to examine the genealogies of a particular set of ideas and practices as they become, under particular historical conditions and circumstances, “correct” Islamic orthodoxy and practice within a web of power relations and, thus, authorized as Islamic tradition. These two analytical perspectives help to unmask the relationship between “orthodoxy,” “orthopractice,” and power and political authority. Neither however provides us with a nuanced analytical perspective through which we can simultaneously unravel the micropolitics of excluded, marginalized, and muted ideas, diverse practices, or discursive irregularities and examine the intersubjectively shaped moral creativity and “plays of mind” (Marsden 2005) and the experiences through which divergent actors develop and cultivate their own self-understanding of what it means to be a Muslim and live a Muslim life (e.g., Rasanaygam 2011). As Samuli Schielke and Georg Stauth (2008:13) point out, sole orientation on orthodoxizing discourse is not very helpful for understanding localized cults and shrines associated with highly complex traditions, imagination, sensibilities, and practices that are often situated beyond discursive categories (cf. Albera and Couroucli 2012).

In reinvigorating Muslim politics as a subject matter of ethnographic research, Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella (2009) have recently argued that some forms of micropolitics should be understood within wider contexts in which politics and various social actors intersect with competing styles and practices as well as with day-to-day ambiguities and the fragility of ethical self-fashioning and moral reasoning. Akin to these authors, I develop a nuanced perspective on discursive constructions of Bosnian Muslim politics “after socialism.” I examine the various (in)coherent and competing styles and practices of the multiple social actors involved, here ethnographically instantiated in the processes of contestation and appropriation of Muslim sacred landscapes and the veneration of holy sites in the central Bosnian highlands.

**Pilgrimage and contest in Muslim Bosnia**

The veneration of holy sites has a long history in Muslim Bosnia (Hadžijahić 1978). The central Bosnian highland range of Zvijezda, where I carried out my fieldwork, is closely associated with the early Islamization of Bosnian lands and their conquest by the Sultan Mehmet al-Fateh in the second half of the 15th century. The devout have visited sacred sites in the region continuously up to the present day despite various historical contingencies, especially during the decades of control and restriction of religious conduct by the socialist Yugoslav state (cf. Bringa 1995).

The veneration of holy sites such as tombs, caves, springs, hills, and trees, as my Bosnian friends often told and, indeed, showed me, is closely entwined with personal notions of well-being, and the associated ritual actions, performed individually or collectively, are conceived of as sources of personal blessing (bereket), fortune and luck (hādir, sreća), and the good life. (See Figure 1.) The long continuity of individual or collective visits to and worship (zijāret) at the holy sites as well as the interweaving of the sites into a vivid narrative culture shape local meanings of what constitutes Bosnian Muslims' sacred landscape as well as a distinct regional Muslim identity. Of particular importance that spreads beyond the region are the annual Muslim pilgrimage to the Karići holy site and the distinctively regional annual pilgrimage gatherings around various outdoor sacred sites (dovište) to engage in prayers for rain (dove za kisú).

**Karići**

Dova na Karićima is the annual three-day pilgrimage during which Bosnian Muslims worship Allah and commemorate Hajdar-dedo Karići on the plateau where the wooden mosque of Karići is located. (See Figure 2.) Although there are no known written records about Hajdar-dedo Karići (Mulaahilović 1989:192–196), his cult persists through a vivid oral tradition, the annual pilgrimage, and individual visits (zijāret) in search of blessing (bereket). Devotees believe that Hajdar-dedo Karići was one of the messengers of Islam who were brought to the Balkan peninsula during early Islamization. In narratives, Hajdar-dedo Karići is portrayed as a wise, knowledgeable Islamic scholar, an effendi, and a dervish sheikh. He decided to build a mosque on top of the plateau after seeking guidance (istikhara) through a dream about where one should be located. In slightly different versions of Hajdar-dedo Karići’s life story, he is described by several oft-repeated motifs: as a scholarly person (učenjak); the founder of the mosque, or holy site, in Karići through the dream revelation; a friend of God (evlija, from Arabic walî); and a person who performed miracles (keramet). The earliest tomb (mezar) at the mosque, facing in the direction of Mecca, has a small pit in the middle and is almost certainly Hajdar-dedo’s, as this kind of gravestone (nišan) was usually made for individuals who performed miracles during their lives. The rainwater caught in the pit is used for healing as well as to secure good luck, blessing, and fortune. Good luck and divine power are associated with the place. Stories circulate that during the Second World War, Četnik troops tried to burn down the wooden mosque, but they could not set it alight by any means. People say that, for the last 150 years, no permanent Muslim community (džemat) has lived on the plateau and that the mosque and
holy site have been used only during the annual pilgrimage. The only residents living in relative proximity until the 1990s war were a few Serbian (Orthodox) families. These families cared for the mosque and had even held the key in the past, although they did not participate in the pilgrimage and worship. Even in more distant villages I repeatedly heard the following story: After the area around the Karići mosque was abandoned by Muslims and was visited only during the annual pilgrimage or by individual devotees, the Orthodox families struggled with bad crops and illness in their livestock. When they searched for help, an Orthodox cleric told them that there must be a sacred object near their homes that they needed to take care of and that it was undoubtedly the Karići mosque. Eventually, the families started to take care of the mosque and all their bad luck vanished.

Although the Yugoslav communist regime oppressed and exercised widespread control over various religious manifestations and gatherings, it did not ban the Karići pilgrimage, which is arguably remarkable because the pilgrimage has historically been well attended (Mulahalilović 1989:192–196). In 1993, during the Bosnian war (1992–95) a Yugoslav National Army tank drove through the ancient wooden mosque. The terrain was at the time barely accessible, as there were many landmines scattered in the ground around the pilgrimage site, so local Muslims temporarily organized the annual gathering in a nearby provincial town mosque. After the war, the landscape was slowly de-mined. The wooden mosque was rebuilt in 2002 and the pilgrimage fully restored.

Although its restoration was initiated by a group of local engaged Muslims, the mosque and the land it sits on are officially owned and access to them is controlled by the state-approved Islamic Community (Islamska Zajednica). The Islamic Community is also responsible for organizing the annual Karići pilgrimage. The pilgrimage takes place at the end of July. The date is counted according to the old Julian calendar as the 11th Tuesday after Jurjevdan (i.e., St. George's Day, May 6). The pilgrimage begins by Friday's noon prayer and lasts until the Sunday midday prayer. Only male Muslims are allowed to attend at Karići.

The pilgrimage gathering usually involves reciting of the entire Qu’ran (hatma dove), singing songs revering Allah (ilahija), and other performances such as the recital of mevlud verses in both Turkish and Bosnian, tevhid for Ottoman as well as Bosnian martyrs (şehide), and collective devotional and ecstatic prayer, kijam zikr (Arabic, qiyam dhikr). The kijam zikr is performed by dervishes and led by a dervish sheikh. Other pilgrims usually observe rather than take part in this form of prayer, as dervishes have historically been conceived of ambiguously
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and were viewed as the Islamic “other within” in the former Yugoslavia (Bringa 1995:221; Duijzings 2000:107). However, the devotional prayer during the pilgrimage was also performed during socialist times. This is arguably significant, as, in the 1950s, the Islamic Community, with the Yugoslav state’s assistance, banned all dervish orders in Bosnia-Herzegovina for being “devoid of cultural value” (Algar 1971:196).3

Unlike the case of the traditional cradles of Bosnian Sufism with their old dervish lodges in the western parts of central Bosnia (cf. Algar 1971; Čehajić 1986; Mičijević 1997), the continuity of dervish orders was severed in the northern parts. Hence, Karići has been publicly presented and understood for a long time solely as a place of Muslim annual pilgrimage. However, in the late 1980s, a dervish group of the Rifa’i order, which I have also studied, was formed in the region.4 In its search for authenticity and the restoration of Sufi teaching (tesavuf) in the region, the group entwined its identity with the historical figure of Hajdar-dedo Karići. Although the dervish group today traces its identity through its sheikh’s “spiritual lineage” (silsila) to Kosovo, the dervishes consider Karići their spiritual cradle, and they conceive of Hajdar-dedo Karići as the messenger of Sufism in the region and their spiritual forefather.

Ajvatovica

The Ajvatovica pilgrimage plays a significant role in the ways village Muslims from the central Bosnian highlands reflect on the transformation of sacred landscapes “after socialism.” In their narratives and casual chats, my village friends often juxtaposed Karići and the Ajvatovica pilgrimages. However, the great majority of them have never pilgrimed to Ajvatovica.

The Ajvatovica pilgrimage, near the village of Prusac, boasts legends similar to those of the Karići site, dating back to the 17th century and involving another legendary messenger of Islam, effendi (and maybe dervish sheikh) Ajvaz-dedo. The legends say that Ajvaz-dedo was a friend of God (evlija). When he came to Prusac, there was no proper water supply in the village. There was only a spring near the village, but it was blocked by a rock. Ajvaz-dedo spent 40 days praying to Allah, and on the 40th day he dreamed about two white rams colliding. When he woke up, the rock had split in half. Local villagers saw this as a miracle (keramet) and blessing (bereket), and, ever since, have pilgrimed to the place where the rock split.

Unlike the Karići pilgrimage, the Ajvatovica was officially banned during the socialist period, in 1947 (cf. Mulahalilović 1989:192–196), and was renewed only in 1990,
mainly through the engagement of the Islamic Community; various media, such as the Islamic weekly publication Prepared; and the Stranka Demokratske Akcije (SDA; Party of Democratic Action), led at the time by Alija Izetbegović. The region where the Ajvatovica pilgrimage site is located was controlled and defended during the war by the Bosnian army, and, hence, through public rhetoric, gained the character of a holy land, expressing the continuity of a threatened Muslim community and its cultural heritage (cf. Ružjanac in press).

It quickly became clear to me that the way the Ajvatovica pilgrimage is orchestrated nowadays plays a significant role in Bosnian Muslim national public politics, as dominated by the Islamic Community, as well as figuring prominently in local conversations. Ajvatovica is presented by the Islamic Community as the biggest annual Muslim gathering in Europe, one with long continuity, despite the official ban imposed in 1947. As they are orchestrated and choreographed, “The Days of Ajvatovica” (Dani Ajvatovice) unfold as an assemblage of religious pilgrimage, political gathering, and social parade composed of various events, concerts, and lectures that are widely advertised and promoted by the Islamic Community through many billboards. The Ajvatovica pilgrimage is presented, to paraphrase various local sources, as a “manifestation of tradition and long lasting continuity of Bosniak [Muslim] identity and culture” and as the “largest Muslim gathering in Europe” (e.g., see Ajvatovica.org.ba 2010). Furthermore, during my fieldwork, I was repeatedly told that Ajvatovica used to be an all-male gathering, although after 1990 it was publicly promoted in the nationalized rhetoric as a gathering for all Muslims. In other words, the Ajvatovica pilgrimage was reorchestrated and instrumentalized in Bosniak political discourse as a fertile symbol in post-Yugoslav public debates on collective Bosniak Muslim identity and in Bosniaks’ search for authenticity as an independent post-Yugoslav nation (nacija).

Contested meanings of the sacred sites

During my stays both in Muslim villages and at the Karići site during pilgrimages, I was often drawn into the friendly conversations (mehābet) of Muslim men discussing their memories of pilgrimage as well as their strong emotional attachment to Karići. Such conversations have obvious narrative form. The men characteristically start with their individual experiences, for instance, by noting the exact date they visited Karići for the first time and continuing by recounting all important dates in the biography of the site as they intersected with their own biographies. For example, Fadil, a pious Muslim in his late sixties, explained to me that from the time he could walk a fairly long distance, as a child around the age of nine, his father had brought him to Karići. When I asked Fadil how many times he has made the pilgrimage to Karići, his answer was straightforward: “Only Allah knows, but as far as I remember I have never omitted, as my father never did.” He also recalled specific Karići pilgrimages, such as one the year his father died, the one the year the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina broke out, and the ones after the site was destroyed and later rebuilt. Younger cohorts, born in the era of socialist Yugoslavia, revealed different memories. Men in their forties often told me that they attended the pilgrimage for the first time only after the end of Yugoslav communism in 1990, many only after the 1990s war, when they realigned themselves with the renewed and liberated Islamic tradition and discourses on Bosnian Muslim identity. A dervish sheikh from Herzegovina in his mid-fifties reminisced,

I visited Karići for the first time in 1981. I remember very vividly how I met old men in very old traditional clothes, fezzes wrapped in a golden cloth which they brought from hajj, and with beautifully decorated horses. It was astonishing. They were so nice. Today it is different, these gatherings (dove) are one of the last expressions of living Bosnian Islam. It is not like Ajvatovica.

I soon realized that, during their narratives and conversations, village Muslims frequently juxtapose Karići and Ajvatovica. The juxtaposition succinctly sheds a contrastive light on profound transformations of intracommunal choreography of the use of sacred sites. The accounts are often very passionate, as the narrators express pride and anger entwined with melancholy over the changing character of the Muslim sacred landscape. In their narrative reflections, both the Karići and Ajvatovica pilgrimages operate as rhetorical as well as materialized tropes through which they try to grasp the changes. During my fieldwork, I also compared media coverage in recent years of the Ajvatovica and the Karići events; the latter received hardly any attention in the public sphere, in the mass media in particular. Muslims of various walks of life from the region also reflected on that fact and blamed the Islamic Community and its imams as well as Bosniak politicians for overlooking the Karići and prioritizing the Ajvatovica, although, paradoxically, at the same time, they were proud that the Karići had not been “polluted” yet by any novelities. In conversations during the pilgrimage in 2008, I was characteristically told,

Today, the Ajvatovica is like many other gatherings (dove) you can attend, all are just one big parade (teferić). Whereas Karići is the place where people come to pray and contemplate together, to have a conversation (mehābet) but not a party (teferić), and it has always been like this. Karići has had continuity! I tell you what, these Bosnian gatherings (dove) aren’t what they used to be. Today, people say that they are going to a
pilgrimage but they mean a parade (teferić). And Ajvatovica? Ehh, that’s for tourists. Only Karići still continues in the way of traditional Muslims’ gatherings (dovia) as it used be everywhere here. Even a few decades ago you could meet so many hajis in the Karići, the golden fezzes were just everywhere. Indeed, in the past people said, “Karići, this is our little hajj.”

This narrative, of a man in his late thirties, embraces rather eloquently some of the competing and contradictory intracommunal perceptions of how activities at the sacred sites are orchestrated nowadays. Indeed, the great majority of narratives and conversations I encountered in the mountains critically reflected on the organizational and choreographed aspects of the pilgrimages. This perspective arguably sheds light on different experiences and changing dynamics of power relations, shifting hierarchies, and the agency of various actors in the process of making sacred sites (Bowman 2010), and it magnifies the contradictions in changing Bosnian Muslim politics. Therefore, the contradictions articulated during pilgrimages are reflected in the everyday forms of discontent between Bosnian Muslims themselves, in how they understand and validate what it means to be a Muslim or what constitutes genuine Bosnian Islamic tradition. In particular, many bitterly commented on the Islamic Community aimed to fossilize the living tradition of Bosnian Sufism and make it part of a distant and folklorized Ottoman past. They also often recalled that the Islamic Community had historically been hostile to Bosnian dervishes, especially in early socialist times, and had banned all dervish orders in 1952 (Popović 1985) and closed all dervish sanctuaries (tekija). In the late 1970s, a few dervish groups were restored in Bosnia—only those orders (the Naqshibandi order, in particular) that were conformist and de facto under direct surveillance and control of the Islamic Community and the state secret police. The allegiance of the Naqshibandi order to the Islamic Community played an important role in the process of renewal of Bosnian Islamic tradition, including Sufism, after the breakdown of Yugoslavia and religious liberation. This historical development created an environment in which the Islamic Community and several groups of the Naqshibandi order claim the right to authoritatively define Sufi teaching as part of the construction and performance of “classical Turkish Sufi music” alongside “whirling Turkish dervishes” as part of the construction and performance of “traditional Bosnian Islam.”

Debating discontent

Ajvatovica

The Ajvatovica is perceived in local narratives as advertised everywhere with a very expensive and conspicuous program of events. The oft-repeated motif of discontent in village Muslims’ narratives is that of increasing politicization of the pilgrimage. However, in speaking of politicization (the expression they usually used is sve je politika—“everything is politics”), my Bosnian friends referred to the political contest between different local Muslim alliances rather than solely to ethnonational (i.e., intercommunal) politics. In particular, many bitterly commented on the ways various Bosniak politicians as well as Islamic ulama instrumentalize the pilgrimage to promote themselves in the public sphere.

However, the main source of discontent is the Islamic Community itself. The Islamic Community is in charge of orchestrating all pilgrimages and religious gatherings and, hence, is recognized by the state as the official authority and guarantor of Bosnian Islamic tradition. As I illustrate at the outset of this article, various networks of Bosnian (Salafi) Muslims have a very scripturalist understanding of Islam. They are usually called in the vernacular “Vehabije” (Wahhabis); they apprehend any local pilgrimage as a heretical practice of idolatry (stärk) and accuse the Bosnian Islamic Community as well as local Muslims of being devoid of Islamic orthodoxy (cf. Cetin 2008). Yet, in the villages where I primarily carried out my fieldwork, Muslim men expressed a different kind of discontent. My village friends pointed out on various occasions that traditional Bosnian pilgrimages, such as the Karići, used to be all male and that the Islamic Community should not have opened up the Ajvatovica pilgrimage to women. This was also the reason some of my friends gave for deciding never to pilgrim to Ajvatovica.

Many local dervish communities also feel rather uneasy about the ways the Ajvatovica is orchestrated, yet for different reasons. During pilgrimages over the past few years, folk groups from Turkey have been invited to perform “classical Turkish Sufi music” alongside “whirling Turkish dervishes” as part of the construction and performance of “traditional Bosnian Islam.” Except for a few groups of the Naqshibandi order aligned with the Islamic Community, Bosnian dervishes are generally excluded from the program of the pilgrimage. Several dervish sheikhs explained to me that, by inviting Turkish folk groups, the Islamic Community aimed to fossilize the living tradition of Bosnian Sufism and make it part of a distant and folklorized Ottoman past. They also often recalled that the Islamic Community had historically been hostile to Bosnian dervishes, especially in early socialist times, and had banned all dervish orders in 1952 (Popović 1985) and closed all dervish sanctuaries (tekija). In the late 1970s, a few dervish groups were restored in Bosnia—only those orders (the Naqshibandi order, in particular) that were conformist and de facto under direct surveillance and control of the Islamic Community and the state secret police. The allegiance of the Naqshibandi order to the Islamic Community played an important role in the process of renewal of Bosnian Islamic tradition, including Sufism, after the breakdown of Yugoslavia and religious liberation. This historical development created an environment in which the Islamic Community and several groups of the Naqshibandi order claim the right to authoritatively define Sufi teaching and often jointly decide what is “Islamic,” “traditional,” or “genuine Sufi teaching” and what ought to be conceived of as a threat to Bosnian Islam.

Karići

The Karići pilgrimage attracts over a thousand pilgrims every year (in the first postwar years after reopening, it was up to several thousand). The Karići is organized less conspicuously than the Ajvatovica. As I have argued above, the Karići pilgrimage is perceived by the majority of the region’s village Muslims as a continuation of “traditional” and genuine Bosnian Muslim practice. (See Figure 3.)
Nonetheless, such a perception is far from universal. In recent years, multiple tensions over and competing meanings of the Karići pilgrimage emerged as a result of the wider transformation of sacred landscapes in post-Yugoslav Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In summer 2009, a group from a Turkish Islamic aid organization was invited by the local branch of the Islamic Community to attend the Karići pilgrimage. As part of its “social aid” activities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, this group organized a summer school for children in regional mosques to study the Qur’an. However, some of the Turks also took part in the Karići program, by publicly reciting the Qur’an and mevlud. Eventually, in conjunction with the nighttime sermon, one of the Turkish guests gave a short speech during which he discussed the importance of Hajdar-dedo Karići and the even greater importance of the Sultan Mehmet al-Fateh, who conquered Bosnian lands more than five centuries ago and spread Islam in the region. The Turkish effendi emphasized how the sultan established intimate and enduring family ties (porodične veze) between Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This speech sharply contrasted with the speech of the local imam, who represented the Islamic Community and who only very briefly repeated a few historical facts about Hajdar-dedo Karići. During his talk, he did not speak of Hajdar-dedo Karići having brought Islam to the region or refer to Karići as a place connected to Sufism; he characterized the Karići pilgrimage simply as a traditional gathering of Bosnian Muslims who had survived various aggressions in the past.

However, among many pilgrims I found an echo of discontent and contradictory and ambiguous reactions. In his speech, the pilgrims argued, the imam detached himself from local, long-standing narratives about Hajdar-dedo Karići and thus also from the ways Bosnian Muslims in the region conceive of themselves. The majority of the pilgrims also rejected the Turkish guest. Although he included Hajdar-dedo Karići firmly in his speech, he did so by embedding regional narratives into a grand narrative of post-imperial-Ottoman nostalgia in which Turkey was the center and Bosnia and Karići a periphery that was “civilized” by the Ottomans. In a unanimous response to the entire orchestration of the pilgrimage, my Muslim interlocutors angrily disapproved: “Did they come to Turkify (turčiti) us again?” They thus expressed sharp disappointment that the Islamic Community brought these Turkish guests and enabled them to intervene in the choreography of the pilgrimage.

The local group of dervishes introduced another voice into the expressions of discontent and intracommunal contestations over the orchestration of the Karići pilgrimage.
Despite their engaged help with the restoration of the damaged Karići mosque in early postwar years and their strong attachments to the story of Hajdar-dedo Karići as a messenger of Sufism in the region, they have not taken any part in the gathering in recent years largely because the Islamic Community, represented by the local imam, has not allowed them to lead the devotional prayer (zikr). Instead, the zikr prayer has been led by sheikhs of the Naqshibandi order; moreover, they are not from the region. The local group of dervishes was not allowed to lead the devotional prayer because it had become involved in translocal dervish networks of the Rifa'i order, with its center in Kosovo, and was thus considered by the local Islamic Community to be a threat. Indeed, as Duizjings (2000:106–131) argues on the basis of his fieldwork in Kosovo, in socialist Yugoslavia the asymmetric relations within the Islamic Community between what he calls the Bosnian-dominated official (Suni of the Hanafi interpretation) Islam and various heterodox (Shi'a) dervish orders such as the Rifa'i, especially in Kosovo, have a long history. In the post-Yugoslav period, when the linkages between many Bosnian and Kosovo dervish orders have been reestablished and even intensified, these old tensions gain new meanings in Bosnian Muslim politics over control of sacred authority and conduct of Muslim practice. Put differently, in the years of post-socialist liberation, the Bosnian Islamic Community is trying to maintain a complete monopoly over the appropriation of the Bosnian sacred landscape and sacred authority, attempting to contain diverse and often competing interpretations of Islam and Muslim practice by various means, including dervishes’ exclusion from the orchestration of the pilgrimage.

Prayers for rain: “Little tradition” contested

Another line of contestation over the choreography of Muslim sacred sites in the central Bosnian highlands is the orchestration of outdoor prayers for rain (dove za kiu). (See Figure 4.) Such prayers are part of annual local pilgrimages to outdoor holy sites (dovište) such as tombs, hilltops, springs, caves, and lime trees. These gatherings have been recognized as a distinctively regional ritual practice (Brinja 1995). The organization of the prayers has been historically related to agricultural production, fertility rituals, and regenerative symbolism (e.g., Brinja 1995:226) and orchestrated in concordance with the local ritual calendar. Tone Brinja describes these gatherings (dova) as women centered. However, in 2008 and 2009, I attended about two-dozen of the outdoor prayers in the highlands, all of which were all-male gatherings. When I later asked women in the villages about this seeming disparity, I learned from them that it is the local customary practice (adet) and that women are in charge of organizing the feasts in participants’ houses that usually follows the gatherings.

However, even this somewhat distinctively regional ritual practice ended up in a fatal embrace with socialist restrictive politics in the Yugoslav period and with turbulent Muslim politics in postwar times. According to Azmir Muftic (2004:221), until 1945, there were approximately sixty sites in use in the region. After 1945, the socialist state, with the assistance of the Islamic Community, imposed many restrictions on their use and attempted to erase various religious practices such as prayers for rain. Indeed, nearly half of the sites ceased to exist. Nonetheless, many continued to be venerated despite the restrictions. Indeed, as some older Muslims often pointed out to me, “Prayer for rain, it was the only place and moment where you could even meet people engaged with the [Communist] Party,” as these events were usually organized with special approval under the official umbrella of traditional village parades (teferi) and gatherings (tradicionalno okupljanje). During the post-Yugoslav religious liberation, and especially after the war in the 1990s, the organization of rain prayers gained significance again, and prayers at many sites have been revived, in some cases as a demonstration of Bosniak traditions and collective identity.

The orchestration of prayers for rain is also under the competence and control of the local branch of the Islamic Community. The gathering usually involves a recital of the Qur’an, the midday prayer, and a prayer for rain. An inextricable part of the gathering today is a sermon and a collective prayer commemorating the souls of Bosnian Muslims who died during the recent wars (Sehide). Although the prayers for rain continue to be conceived by many Muslims in mountain villages as significant fertility rituals according to which they schedule various agricultural activities, the Islamic Community and other actors view them differently. Local dervishes have actively participated in the rain prayers along with villagers and even assisted in some cases with their postsocialist revivals. During my fieldwork, I learned from several dervish sheikhs that some of the outdoor sacred sites at which the prayers take place are associated in local narratives and legends with dervish messengers in the early Islamization of the region. Indeed, some of the sites are known in the vernacular as Sheikh’s Tekke (Šejhova Tekija), Sheikh’s Spring (Šejhova Voda), and Sheikh Feruh’s Turbe (Šejh Feruhovo Turbe). Hence, as in the case of the Karići site, local dervishes conceive of gatherings at the outdoor sites and maintaining the practice of prayers for rain as part of their spiritual tradition. Many imams, conversely, see these gatherings solely as a way to debate, channel, and authorize the discourses on religious orthodoxy and the political identity of Bosnian Muslims.

After one of the prayers, I interviewed the imam who led the gathering, a cleric who had received religious
training in Saudi Arabia (Medina). He was surprised that I was interested in these pilgrimages, and he ironically pointed out to me, “It would be better to abandon such heretical (bogomil) traditions.” Then he added, with strong disapproval in his voice, “What a folk Islam! I don’t understand why people still care.” Muslims in the mountains describe and react to “reformist” imams like this man ambiguously. I was often told that someone who was not born in the region and did not grow up there could hardly understand the importance of rain prayers. Other village Muslims often ironically added that, for the reformist imams, “manure will always stink,” thereby expressing the imams’ detachment from village life. The reaction of one villager neatly and straightforwardly captures this ambiguity and Muslim villagers’ reasoning: “He is not traditionalist but revolutionist. He is not interested in any tradition. If so, then it is the dead tradition contained in the books. He is from the outside, he does not understand what people care about and strive for here.”

On another occasion, in which the prayer for rain was led by a local imam, the same villager who disapproved so strongly of the “orthodox” imam commented of the local cleric, “He is a good effendi, one of us, he does not pretend anything. The effendi is from here, not like those young imams today who don’t respect our tradition, the tradition of Bosnian Muslims. Contrarily, they try to impose various foreign novelties from Turkey or Arabia where they studied. This is not good.”

These tensions, however, must not be interpreted simply as a conflict between the “modernist” Islamic community and parochial regional “traditionalists.” The ways village Muslims apprehend and enact what constitutes “correct” Muslim practice or choreography of sacred spaces are often contradictory. In particular, in those mountain villages where new mosques were built only recently, and often thanks to Islamic “humanitarian aid organizations” from the Gulf (Karčić 2010), the choreography of prayers for rain was also contested. In some cases, the prayers were relocated from the outdoor holy sites to the mosques, which has generated tensions in village politics, both secular and religious, and has often driven a wedge between village neighbors. During my visit to one village, a resident described an ongoing dispute over the relocation of the rain prayer from the outdoor holy site to the newly built village mosque: “We have a new mosque even with a balcony, so why should we climb to the hills forevermore? We should follow progress, we ought to be modern!”

Here, the trope of “being modern” gains a specific meaning. A villager later explained to me that it means “adjusting the traditional custom (adet), not its abandonment.”
Nonetheless, on that day, I observed how approximately two hundred men of various ages got together at the local holy site, about an hour’s walk away, to pray for rain. However, the potential danger of tensions between village Muslims and imams lies elsewhere. As I have argued, prayers for rain are to a great extent under the control and competence of the Islamic Community, and any decision related to their orchestration needs to meet with the approval of the respective local branch (medžilis) of the Islamic Community. In the village I describe here, the dispute had intensified because the newly appointed village imam, a representative of the Islamic Community, was not from the region. Moreover, he had also studied in Saudi Arabia, and his attitude toward prayers for rain was rather dismissive, meaning that he decided not to attend the prayer. Hence, some of the villagers did not hesitate to call him a “Wahabi” (Wahabija), and eventually the two village factions with different opinions about the orchestration of the rain prayer were united in discontent against the imam and so invited another imam to the outdoor holy site, one who did not question either the choreography or the practice of prayers and to whom “manure does not stink,” as one of my friends added half-jokingly.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have documented a complex nexus and transformation of Bosnian Muslims’ relations with holy sites in the context of debates about sacred landscapes and Bosnian Muslim politics more broadly. I have sketched out competing and contested meanings of the Ayvatovica and the Karići pilgrimages and of ritualized prayers for rain in the central Bosnian highlands to shed light on wider ongoing processes of transformation in Muslim politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina “after socialism.”

Many authors have recently discussed forms of negotiation, contestation, and control over sacred authority, correct practice, or moral conduct in contemporary Muslim societies (e.g., Asad 1986; Bowen 1993; Mahmood 2005) and have explored the multifaceted character of Muslim politics (Soares and Osella 2009). However, Bosnian Muslim politics has been largely analyzed in terms of ethnonationalism, of Muslims in relation to other ethnoreligious groups (Bougarel 2003; Bringa 2002) rather than in terms of internal contests over sacred authority, space, and religious practice (Eickelman and Piscatory 1996; Sorojbi 1988). Yet at the end of her lucid ethnography based on her fieldwork in prewar Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bringa wrote,

“We are... • American Ethnologist

The war changes people and it changes their perceptions of who they are. As a reaction to and part of the process of the war and the politics behind it, many Bosnian Muslims are redefining both the content and function of their collective identities, and identi-
these sites assemble contingent and contesting voices and debates about what constitutes “proper” Islam or the cosmologies of post-Yugoslav nationalism.

These findings open a second set of more general questions, involving the need to employ an integrative perspective that would embrace discursive constructions of Muslim politics with nuanced insights into the micropolitics of (in)coherent, experiential reflections of the world and of the place of a Muslim person in it, with all the struggles, ambivalences, or paradoxes entailed (Soares and Osella 2009). Indeed, during my time in post-socialist and postwar Bosnian Muslim villages, I encountered multiple actors, such as the Islamic Community, foreign Islamic aid agencies, imams educated abroad, Salafists who direct an “anti-idolatry” rhetoric against sacred sites, peripatetic dervishes with links throughout the Balkans, and village Muslims, all competing over coherent and definite interpretations of Islamic practice and the appropriation of the sacred landscape. However, the multiplicity of the actors involved in village Muslims’ lives points to how Bosnian Muslim politics has been intertwined with local or regional, national, and global modes of imagining and belonging to the Muslim world in turbulent post-Yugoslav times. By tracing conversations, contradictions, and contradictions in conversations, I have shown how transformations of the modes of imagination can lead to various forms of discontent among Bosnian Muslims. Yet such a polyvocality under-mines what is usually portrayed, in the logic of “groupism,” as a community of Bosnian Muslims that is far too complex and effervescent to be analyzed in terms of collective ethnonational identities.

The ethnographic examination of public discourses on Bosnian Muslim politics, sacred landscapes, and holy sites as well as of contradictory self-altering narratives highlights the ambiguity of and rupture between hegemonic discourses and social knowledge derived from the vicissitudes of social life. The two examples discussed here—of the two pilgrimages and of prayers for rain—cast light on the complexities of living Islam in Bosnia today. The multifaceted discontent in Muslims’ conversations and conduct as well as competing discursive constructions of Bosnian Islam unpack uncertainties in both postwar and post-socialist Bosnian society. This multiplicity renders notions of Bosnian Muslim identity, tradition, sacred landscapes, and authenticity constantly fragile, situational, and uncertain.

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1. The material discussed in this article is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted since 2008 in Bosnia-Herzegovina. For a period of 18 months in total, I have chiefly worked in the central Bosnian highlands in Muslim villages that have historically been “ethnically unmixed.” My research has focused on Muslim cosmologies, the resurgence of dervish orders, and transformations of Muslim practice, local economy, and forms of relatedness and social support in the context of turbulent post-war and post-socialist changes.

2. Mevlud verses honor the birth of the Prophet Mohammad; tevhid is collective prayer for the souls of the dead; zikr is a remembrance of God’s names and dervish recitation in praise of God.

3. Ger Duijzings even argues that “the official Islamic Community, in particular, was co-opted by the Communist system, more than the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches ... it was sometimes compared with a melon: green (the colour of Islam) outside but thoroughly red inside” (2000:112).

4. Several authors, such as Duijzings (2000) and Alexandre Popović (1985), have pointed out that in the 1980s many dervish orders flourished in Yugoslavia, and they are often related to larger processes of a so-called Islamic revival in Bosnia (Irwin 1984; Sorabji 1988). However, this term seems rather misleading as it refers to Islam and Muslims in general, yet what happened in Bosnia in the 1980s was, rather, the emergence of political Islam in terms of collective identity debates. Indeed, Xavier Bougarel (2003, 2007) describes these processes as the politicization of Muslim ethnic identity, accelerated by the 1990s war.

5. By social aid, I mean an intersection of Islamism and humanitarianism (cf. Bellion-Jourdan 2000), that is, a da’wa (call to Islam) activity modified to address local needs and problems.

6. The verb turcit, or poturcit, comes from the period of Islamization and the spread of Ottoman cultural patterns and means “to Turkify oneself” (see also Malcom 1994:59). The use of the verb today is rather ambiguous or negative.

7. Tekke is a dervish lodge–sanctuary. Türbe is a mausoleum that is worshipped. In central Bosnia, I learned that the word dervish has been used interchangeably with disciple (of a Sufi order), but the former prevails in the vernacular (also Brinda 1995: 221; Duijzings 2000).

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