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Albanian Identities

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Historical background. Ethnogenesis.

Like most of the Balkan nations, the Albanians, too, have a multifold and complex identity, as well as their own contradictory and difficult historical fate. Western historiography regards as "perplexing the ethnic variety in Southeastern Europe, which is the result of age-old processes of assimilation by local and foreign elements. What is more, in this case we do not have a succession of different ethnic groups, but rather different forms emerging from ascending layers".¹

Scholarship has embraced as sufficiently convincing the thesis that the origins of the Albanian ethnos go back to ancient Illyrians. Of course, this bottom layer was overlaid by Greek colonists' influence in the coastal area, and Romanisation imposed by the legions and the garrison towns in Macedonia and along the Dalmatian-Albanian seashore. The traces of the German tribes of Ostrogoths and Visigoths have been lost, but, on the other hand, the Slavs expansion in Southeastern Europe during the 6th century led to a substantial change in the ethnic map of the region. As a matter of fact, a legend has been told among the Albanians that they come from the same tribe as Alexander the Great - a megalomaniacal claim common to other Balkan nations too. He is attributed an order given during one of the wars between Macedonians and Greeks, put in a phrase used to date in the Albanian language: "Go, strike, slash, let no stone be left under your feet." To make this legend sound convincingly enough, Albanians assert that the quoted words have been cut into a stone of the Acropolis.² The period of the Roman domination, the 2nd-4th centuries A.D., marked the beginning of a major differentiation, effective throughout the Albanians' historical development, in the processes taking place in the North and in the South. The population in the more backward North succumbed to assimilation and lost its language and its Illyrian identity awareness. On the contrary, owing to their higher level of development and cultural and ethnic distinction, the Illyrians in the South could keep their identity even under the Roman Empire and its strong civilisation pressure.³

Part of the population, which lived in the high inland country and was organised in its majority in some kind of cattle-breeding or village communities, preserved for a long time its tribal characteristics, being only nominally subject to the Roman rule. To obtain their subordination, Rome passed special laws. The legal status of these tribes was one of free people, but in the social hierarchy they held a place between the Romans enjoying civil rights, and the multitude of slaves, who had no rights at all. Ptolemy of Alexandria, the famous Greek astronomer and geographer (2nd c. A.D.), lists the names of the free Illyrian tribes and mentions among them the tribe of the "Albanoi" (Arbërs according to some other sources), who lived in the mountainous area between Durrës and Debar (Alb. Dibra), referring to their town as Albanopolis. There are philological theories assuming that the name of "Albanoi", or "Arbanitai", means "people dressed in white", from the Latin *albus*. From among this mass of free peasants, who were granted civil rights by a decree issued in 212, Rome recruited soldiers to guard its borders from the barbarian tribes. Their squads grew in number to such an extent that the Illyrian military began to play an important part in Roman political life, even ascending the imperial throne at certain points. In the course of over a century seven Illyrian-born emperors ruled in succession. One of them, Emperor Diocletian, carried out an administrative reform in the Roman Empire by constituting prefectures, dioceses and provinces. In conformity with this reorganisation, the Albanian territory was divided into three provinces: Praevalitana, with Shkodra (Shkodër) as its administrative centre, Epirus Nova, Dyrrachium as its capital, and Epirus Vetus, with its central city at Nikopis. The latter two were

¹ "Albanian Identities" is a chapter of the book *Albania and the Albanian Identities*, edited by Antonina Zhelyazkova, Sofia, IMIR, 2000, pp. 9-63.

part of the Macedonian diocese. The dioceses of Dacia and Macedonia were constituent parts of the prefecture of Illyricum, which comprised the entire Balkans.

When in 395 Emperor Theodosius divided the empire into two independent parts - the Western Roman Empire, with its capital at Rome, and the Eastern Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital, the borderline between the two portions of the empire was drawn across the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. Under the push of invasions by the Barbarian tribes it steadily moved westwards.

Of Illyricum, which embraced the dioceses of Pannonia, Dacia and Macedonia, the Western Empire took over only Pannonia after the division. Dacia and Macedonia were conceded to the Eastern Empire. Today's Albanian territories were then all part of the eastern portion of the empire, that is part of the Byzantine Empire.

In the 7th century the tides of Avars and Slavs flooded the Peninsula and closed in on the imperial capital of Constantinople. In the course of nearly two centuries, Southeastern Europe was inaccessible to Byzantium's control. When in 800 the Byzantine counteroffensive got underway, the progressing ethnic changes were already a reality, and difficult to revise.⁴

One of the key directions for expansion of the Bulgarian kingdom at the time of its efflorescence in the 9th-10th centuries, was southwestwards. Then not only Macedonia, but also Albania, became an object of rivalry between Byzantium and Bulgaria. Thus, for a comparatively long period of time, between 851 and 1018, the present-day territory of Albania was under Bulgarian authority.⁵

In the middle of the 11th century the official split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church became a reality. When their spheres of influence were fixed, the dividing line ran across today's Albanian lands granting the Roman Catholic Church authority over their northern parts. During this period the Eastern Orthodox Church still dominated because of the long-lasting influence of Byzantium and Bulgaria.

Late in the 12th century, the first independent principality of Albania (Arbania) was established on the territory of present-day central Albania, having its capital at Kruja (Krujë). In the sources, the princes, who stood at the head of the small formation, are referred to as Arbëreshes (Arbanians), and so is the population under their rule. With its gradual expansion, the principality clashed with the Byzantine and the Slav feudal lords. The newly formed Arbëresh aristocracy sought to enlarge their estates, to obtain independence, to be emancipated from the foreign rule, in a word - to constitute their own state. Around 1204 the principality of Arbania emancipated itself from Byzantine control, but, in turn, fell under pressure by the Despotate of Epirus to the south, the Serbian principality of Zeta to the north, and the county of Durrës, established by the Venetian Republic, to the west. In order to withstand efforts by the Republic of San Marco to annex Arbania to the county of Durres, prince Dimiter (1206-1216) asked the Pope for support promising him to adopt the Catholic faith. At the same time, he married the daughter of the Serbian prince of Rascia, and by doing so clearly became a full-grown political factor in the region.

Back to the time of the ephemeral existence of the Albanian medieval principality dates a trade agreement with the Republic of Ragusa [modern Dubrovnik, Croatia], signed by Dimiter and fourteen Arbanian princes, which guaranteed peace, granted the Ragusan merchants the right of free movement across Arbanian lands and exempted them from taxes and duties. One can conclude from the text of this agreement that some sort of feudal hierarchy was observed in the principality: Dimiter called himself Grand Archon implying supreme feudal lord.

Soon after the death of Dimiter, the despot of Epirus Theodore Angelos Comnenos (1216-1230) subjugated the principality of Arbania and launched campaigns to restore Byzantine power. His

intentions were in conflict with the interests of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Assen, so in 1230 Theodore Comnenos was defeated, and Macedonia and Albania became part of the Bulgarian possessions.

In 1253 the emperor of Nicaea tricked the Arbanians with pledges to grant them the right of self-determination, and spread his authority over them. His failure to fulfil his promises stirred the Albanians, who drove the Nicaean troops out of their territory and for about a year enjoyed an independent existence.

Through a dynastic marriage between King of Sicily Manfred Hohenstaufen and the daughter of the despot of Epirus, an attempt was made to consolidate the control of Epirus over the Albanian principality. This plan ended in failure, but the Sicilian king received Vlora (Valona, Avlona, modern Vlorë), Kanina, and Berat, as dowry, succeeding, through the agency of his German and Arbanian feudal lords, to keep his power over Arbania for several years. In 1266 Manfred died in a battle against Charles of Anjou, who, proclaiming himself the King of Sicily, took over the rule in Arbaria too. In the course of several years he expanded his power and in 1272 Durrës - the major medieval Albanian town - was already in his hands. In order to win over the support of the local population, Charles proclaimed in the same year in Naples the establishment of the Albanian Kingdom declaring himself its king. The Albanian princes were granted feudal estates and family titles corresponding to the western hierarchy. Despite this gesture, the Italian and French aristocrats, who moved to the Albanian lands, gradually took over all posts in the Kingdom of Albania and seized the largest feuds. The discontent among the native feudal lords and the population in general made them take the side of the Byzantines when the latter were waging war against the Anjou dynasty. . In 1304 the Anjou stepped in Albania once again, and then Philip of Anjou made energetic moves to restore the privileges and lean on the support of the princes of Albania, in order to ensure his allies not only against Byzantium, but also against the Serbs, who at that time were already striving to expand in Albania. The common interests caused Philip to share his power in Arbaria with the local princes. Thus a member of the Blinisht clan was appointed marshal of the Anjouan corps in Albania, a member of the Thopia clan was granted a count's title and was recognised as ruler of the lands lying between the rivers Mat and Shkumbin; Andrea Muzaki received the title of despot of Albania and the lands stretching between the Shkumbin and the Seman.

The Anjou-Albanian alliance could not prevent the occupation of Albania's territory by the Serbian Kingdom. In 1343-1347 Stefan Dushan conquered almost the entire territory of Albania without Durrës, which remained under the control of the Anjou dynasty. The Serbian Empire was short-lived and disintegrated with the death of Stefan Dushan in 1355. During that period the Albanian feudal lords founded numerous independent principalities.

The Albanian identity and the geographical environment.

It is important to get an idea of the natural environment and the way of living of the Albanian feudal lords and the indigenous population during the 14th century, for it was then that the real historical and cultural background of the Albanians was formed, and its traces are distinguishable to date.

The great Albanian princes lived in fortresses: the Thopias - in Kruja (Krujë), and the family coat of arms on their standard was a crowned lion; the Muzaka - in Berat, their coat of arms a two-headed eagle with a star in the middle; the Dukagjin - in Lezhë (Lesh) - one-headed white eagle on their banner. The arms of the Kastrioti family, a double-headed black eagle against a red background, is the familiar Albanian national flag of today.

The rough natural setting of the Albanian topography, perhaps most notably of all other places in the Balkans, exemplifies F. Braudel's thesis of the intricate relationship between mountains,

civilisations and religion. "The mountains, says Braudel, are as a rule a world apart from civilisations, which are an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none, to remain almost on the fringe of the great waves of civilisation, even the longest and most persistent, which may spread over great distances in the horizontal plane but are powerless to move vertically when faced with an obstacle of a few hundred metres".⁶

In the mountainous areas of Albania the majority of the inhabitants were free peasants, petty owners, engaged predominantly in stock-breeding. The contacts between the highlanders and the feudal lords were reduced to a minimum, to the payment of taxes agreed in advance, most commonly *travnina*, a rent for tenancy of pastures. There were also mountain-dwellers who never paid duties and maintained no contacts with the authorities or the princes. Entirely free, they occupied infertile, and small, patches of land up in the hills. Therefore, they lived in utmost poverty and were sometimes forced to interrupt their isolation seeking to make a living. Frequently, their coming down to lower and more productive areas and their migration were of the nature of raids on the villages, towns and feudal estates. Irrespective of the cruel punishments imposed by the Byzantine army, the incursions and the movement of the highlander Albanians did not cease. Together with their livestock, large masses of Albanians migrated to the north nearly as far as Ragusa and the Danube, and to Epirus and Thessaly to the south. In this way, the Albanians settled in lands abandoned by the Greek and French feudal lords in Peloponnesus, Attica and some of the Aegean islands. The tradition of a steadfast migration of the Albanians seeking to overcome indigence has lasted throughout the ages of Ottoman rule up to the modern times. The ethnic Albanians, who settled in Kosovo and Macedonia during the 17th century, were part of precisely these North Albanian highlanders.

Actually, the tradition of an aggressive settlement of the highland *fises* in new places of residence was prompted not only by poverty, by the scarcity of land and pastures, and hence, of cattle. There was one more very important reason - blood feud. It forced not only the residents of poor communities to leave their native places, but even some who were better off. Sometimes single families would head for new habitations - for example, one family from the *vllaznija* (brotherhood - a kinship unit smaller than the *fis* or the clan) of Kaçorraj left for Lura, another - for Milot. They were fleeing from their own *vllaznija*, and nobody knows anything about them in Kaçorraj. Similarly, the northernmost territories were colonised by large groups of families of the clans of Kelmendi, Berisha, Shala, and others, who left the principal clan territories situated mainly in the central part of the northern region.⁷

Even in modern times, scholars may hear from Albanians living in Kosovo, or in the valley of Bitola-Prilep, live recollections about the two reasons for their migration from Northern Albania ages ago: good opportunities for cattle-breeding and flight from blood feud, in which most of the Albanian clans have ever been involved.⁸

Only in places where the action of the Church could be persistently reinforced, was it able to tame these independent peasants, argues Braudel. But it took an incredibly long time. In the 16th century, the task was far from complete and this applies to Catholicism and Islam alike... Everywhere in the 16th century, the hilltop world was very little influenced by the dominant religions at sea level; mountain life persistently lagged behind the plain.⁹ One proof of this is the great ease with which, when circumstances did permit, new religions were able to make massive, though unstable, conquests in these regions. In the Balkan world in the 15th century, whole areas of the mountains went over to Islam, in Albania as in Herzegovina around Sarajevo. What this proves above all is that they had been only slightly attached to the Christian church. The same phenomenon was to recur during the war of Candia, in 1647. Large numbers of Cretan mountain dwellers, joining the Turkish cause, renounced their faith. Similarly, in the 17th century, when faced with the Russian advance, the Caucasus went over to Muhammad and produced in his honour one of the most virulent forms of Islam.¹⁰

Further on, when we go into the specifics of the spread and adaptation of Islam across the Albanian lands, we shall see as entirely applicable Braudel's theory about the "separate religious

geography for the mountain world, which constantly had to be taken, conquered and reconquered. Many minor facts encountered in the traditional history take on a new meaning in this light."¹¹

The primitive originality and cultural isolation of the Albanian mountain settlements is a sound evidence that life from the plains and towns penetrated with difficulty the highland world. The feudal order as a political, social, and economic system and as an instrument of justice failed to catch in its toils most of the mountain regions, and those it did reach it only partially influenced. All imperial attempts to impose an administration and order of its own in the mountains of Albania ended in failure. F. Braudel asserts this is characteristic of any highland and "the observation could be confirmed anywhere where the population is so inadequate, thinly distributed, and widely dispersed as to prevent the establishment of the state, dominant languages, and important civilisations".¹² The author gives as an example the blood feud tradition so typical of the Albanians (solely among them throughout the Balkan region). A study of the vendetta would lead us to the same conclusion: the countries where the vendetta was in force (and they were all mountainous countries) were those that had not been moulded and penetrated by medieval concepts of feudal justice: the Berber countries, Corsica, and Albania, for example.

Lord Kinross, too, was impressed by the independence of the Albanians and sought the explanation in the geographical factors claiming that in many respects Albania owes its independence to the natural conditions - to the inaccessibility of the mountain ridges - as well as to the martial spirit of its own people, of those hardy mountain-dwellers allied in clans, whom Skanderbeg had united and kept under his authority.¹³

One more characteristic feature: it is only in the lowlands that one finds close-knit, stifling communities, a prebendal clergy, a haughty nobility, and an efficient system of justice. The mountain is a refuge of liberty, of democracy, of peasant 'republics'. 'The steepest places have been at all times the shelter of freedom' writes the learned Baron De Tott in his *Memoirs*... 'A poor thing was Turkish despotism -' exclaims Braudel as a remark to these words - 'ruler indeed of the roads, passes, towns, and plains, but what can it have meant in the Balkan highlands, or in Greece and Epirus, in the mountains of Crete where the Skafiotes defied, from their hilltops, all authority from the 17th century onward, or in the Albanian hills, where, much later, lived Ali Pasha of Tepedelenli? Did the Wali Bey, installed at Monastir by the Turkish conquests of the 15th century, ever really governed? In theory his authority extended to the Greek and Albanian hill villages, but each one was a fortress, an independent enclave and on occasion could become a hornets' nest."¹⁴

As anywhere else in the early Middle Ages, with the growth of crafts, in the lower littoral areas of Albania there emerged guilds, corporations, and the group of urban residents engaged in trading grew in number. The Adriatic coastal centres were flourishing as a result of a busy trade, mostly with Ragusa and Venice. The ports of Durrës, Ulcinj, Vlora, and Lezhë thrived, new port centres emerged, among them such along the larger rivers. According to the privileges granted already by the Byzantine rulers, the citizens were not serfs and even enjoyed some political and civil rights: the right to take part in the council of citizens, the right of municipal self-government, considerable local autonomy.

Owing to the boom in the economy and the period of political stability, especially after the break-up of the Serbian Kingdom, the Albanian princes consolidated their power and, in the long run, sought to become absolutely independent masters of their feudal estates. Naturally, this gave rise to new political relations between the Albanian princes. Rivalries evolved and internecine wars were waged in pursuit of expansion and takeover of the more developed urban centres. Throughout the second half of the 14th century Albania was overwhelmed by clashes between the big clans, all its territory being overpowered by anarchy and the antagonism among them. In consequence, the more powerful were devouring towns, lands, and the feuds of the weaker. There appeared several big feudal estates, three of which evolved into principalities.

George Kastrioti-Skanderbeg's resistance to the Ottomans. Heroicity as part of the Albanian individuality.

In 1924, a brilliant Bulgarian observer and connoisseur of Albania, gave the following description of the Albanians: "...isn't the Albanian, who, being a slave, did not allow enslavement, freedom-loving? This is a question that could hardly be understood by anyone who has not lived in Albania. The most liberty-loving people in the Balkans is the Albanian people. The Albanian, taken alone, as an individual, is an anarchist by nature. He would brook no bondage let alone on his people, he would not let anything, seen as possibly humiliating, befall his house. The Albanian house stands alone and apart from the rest... The Albanian, being very touchy and left with no law enforcement, during long ages had been forced to defend his freedom and family honour with arms and so bear today the stigma of being a killer."¹⁵

The political situation in Albania prior to the Ottoman invasion had been very complicated because of the high level of feudal partitioning of the country. There were several independent principalities ruled by the most powerful Albanian feudal lords: of Durrës in Central Albania, ruled by Carlo Thopia; of despot Spat in Epirus; of the Balsha family in Northern Albania; of Theodore Muzaka of Berat, comprising the lands around Berat.

In the 1430s the ruling circles in Constantinople, represented by Andronicus III and John Cantacuzenus were reconciled with the loss of Asia Minor to the numberless Turkic tribes and beyliks. The territory of the entire peninsula of Asia Minor was Turkicised and Islamised. It was there, on the ruins of the older political and cultural institutions, that the Muslims, the steppe peoples and tribal unions set up a new type of polity and socioeconomic system.¹⁶ The policy of the Byzantine rulers was directed to the strengthening of the Balkan positions of the empire, and the Muslim beyliks in Asia Minor were expected to contribute to its realisation.¹⁷ With the help of mercenaries from Ayd?n, Andronicus III and John Cantacuzenus managed to conquer Epirus, Thessaly, and Southern Albania. From the Byzantine point of view, the activation of the Balkan politics was the only move the empire could make in the 1330s. In the Balkans perspective, however, such action involved the risk of aggravating the inter-Balkan relations, something particularly dangerous in the face of a strong Asian enemy.¹⁸

By the beginning of 1386 the lord of Yanina, the Florentine Esau Buondelmonti declared his vassalage to the Ottomans and confirmed it appearing in person in the town of Edirne. In the same period, his southern neighbour and rival Albanian despot Gjin Bua Spata, had to do the same. Until his death in 1400 despot Gjin Bua Spata more than once resorted to Ottomans help in the wars he waged against the Rhodes Knights Hospitallers, who at that time made efforts to gain a firm foothold in Lepanto and Corinth. Individual members of the Albanian clan of Muzaka also became Ottoman vassals.

During the siege of Saloniki in the summer of 1385, the Ottoman ak?nc? troops made their way through Berat and the Devoll River into the central parts of the Albanian littoral. And they met with no organised resistance there, although they were confronted with a seemingly strong state - Zeta, dominated by the three Balsha brothers who had succeeded after 1371 to spread their domination as far as Valona. The consolidation of power of the Balsha family in Albania was hindered by their continuous conflicts with local Albanian feudal lords and the obvious territorial particularism of their possessions. The only Christian ruler who attempted to stop Hayreddin Pasha was Balsha II Balsha. He had to face a 40,000-strong army, commanded by Evrenos-beg, called in, as a matter of fact, by the rival clan of the Thopias. According to the historian Orbini of Dubrovnik, the army of the Balsha, numbering a thousand soldiers, was routed and Balsha II died on the battlefield.¹⁹ Balsha's death in the battle of Savra made it possible for the Kastrioti family to restore their possessions and even multiply them at the expense of the Ballsas, expanding to the south as far as the lands along the Black Drin River, as well as westwards and northwestwards.

Following the bloody battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, in which some of the Albanian princes also took part, the feudal particularisation of the country even magnified. Taking advantage of George

II Balsha's weakness, many of his feudal vassals - the Dukagjin, Zachary, Yonima, etc., seceded from the North-Albanian principality and established their independent dominions.

In 1392 Carlo Thopia's successor, George, signed a document the clauses of which provided that after his death Durrës would be inherited by Venice. George II Balsha, too, could not sustain the pressure by the Venetian Republic. He also accepted vassalage, conceding to the Venetians a large portion of his principality, the town of Shkodra included. Very soon, however, he became disappointed by the Republic's endeavours to restrict his revenues, as well as by the Hungarians' defeat at Nikopol, and turned for support again to the Ottoman governor of Skopje Yi?it Pa?a. One after another the feudal lords in Central and Southern Albania came to declare their independence, splitting and weakening further the country's power of resistance.

The strong economic pressure exerted by Venice on the vassal provinces, accompanied by religious persecution of non-Catholics, compelled the Albanian feudal lords to make war with the Venetians in defence of their own independence. This demoralised them even more. Many of them preferred to negotiate with the Ottoman conquerors, in order to keep their positions and autonomy. All the more that in the time of Sultan Murad I (1360-1389) the Ottomans were in no hurry to introduce their administration in these territories recognising instead the vassalage of the Albanian feudal lords.

The severe battle at Kosovo Pole in 1389, the defeat of the Ottomans by Tamerlane in the battle of Ankara in 1402, and the internecine dynastic strife checked for some time the appetite of the Ottoman Empire for a rapid expansion westwards. Simultaneously, the Ottomans persisted in their policy of making use of vassalage for draining the resistance of the Christian feudal lords and princes. The troops of the vassals were used for expansion eastwards against the non-Ottoman *beyliks* in Asia. In a letter of 1391, Emperor Manuel Palaiologos mentions "Tribals, Moesians and Illyrians" (Serbs, Bulgarians, and Albanians), who fought fiercely against the Anatolian *beyliks*, "believing they were punishing those who had made them suffer in the past." In other words, in defying the Islamic enemy, the Christian vassals sought a kind of compensation for their own defeats by the Ottomans in the Balkans.²⁰

The dismembered Albanian territories and the unceasing pressure by Venice provided favourable conditions for the Ottoman expansion. In the period of 1415-1419, Sultan Mehmed I (1402-1421) managed to oust the local princes from Southern Albania, to deprive them of their possessions and establish the Ottoman military-feudal order in their place. He recognised only the vassalage of the large clans in Central and Northern Albania.

The heroic resistance of the Albanians led by George Kastrioti-Skanderbeg, which lasted even after his death, until almost the end of the 15th century, is of key importance in understanding the mentality and folk psychology of the Albanians. It portrays the Albanians, in the context of the Balkan peoples' history, as an ethnos that confronted most valiantly and steadfastly the Ottoman conquerors. In terms of the issue of the Albanian identity, the uprising of Skanderbeg and the enduring resistance add further touches to the collective portrait of the Albanians - they stand out as a people characterised by a freedom-loving mind and rebellious spirit, coupled with unyielding belligerence. The facts from this period, and from later times, provide convincing evidence of the anthropogeographical characteristics which Cvijic, and Hösch in the present regard as a typical zone of patriarchal order in the highland regions of the Western Balkans, where the dominant social human type is one having a markedly manly-heroic ideal of life.²¹

As a vassal of the Ottomans, one of the Albanian feudal lords, Gjin Kastrioti, was forced to send in 1423 his son George as a hostage of Sultan Murad. There the Albanian was converted to Islam and was given the name of Iskender. George Kastrioti - Iskender took part in the military campaigns of the sultan, distinguished himself, and was granted the title of be?. In 1438, he was appointed suba?? of the vilâyet of Kruja, a town having been once part of the possessions of the Kastrioti family. In 1440, he was promoted to sancakbey of Debar [Alb. Dibra]. Although he served at the Ottoman court, George Kastrioti sought opportunities to organise a resistance against his suzerain. First, with the mediation of his father, he entered into negotiations with Venice, later, on 28 November 1443, taking advantage of the wars waged by John Hunyadi, he proclaimed a

rebellion and made efforts to unite the Albanian forces to ensure its success. It is a curious circumstance that Skanderbeg's mother was a Slav woman, according to some sources a Bulgarian named Voisava, a fact recorded in an anonymous Venetian chronicle: "Huic uxor fuit Voisava, Pologi Domini filia, est autem Pologum oppidum in Macedoniae et Bulgariae confinibus" (the provinces of Upper and Lower Polog ranged over the territory of the Tetovo plain - A.t.).²²

After the proclamation of the uprising against the Ottomans, Skanderbeg with his troops destroyed the garrison of Kruja and restored the independent principality of the Kastrioti. At that time, the Ottoman administration was already functioning in the family's estates - Ottoman garrisons had been stationed in the fortresses, any traces of the former rule of the Kastrioti had been erased. In this situation, Skanderbeg's struggle for overthrowing Ottoman power coincided with his desire to restore and keep the feudal heritage and authority of the Kastrioti clan.

Skanderbeg's example gave impetus to the liberation movements in Central and Northern Albania. Nearly all princes rejected the Ottoman rule, and the big Albanian clans reestablished their principalities. George Kastrioti made efforts to unite all moral and material resources of the individual families in a successful struggle against the Ottomans. To this effect, on 2 March 1444 he called in Lezhë an assembly of the Albanian princes, where almost all of them gathered: the Arianits, Dukagjin, Crnojevic, Balshas, Thopias, Muzakas, as well as the leaders of the free Albanian tribes from the high mountains. In spite of the discord among the princes, they founded a union, which went down in history by the name of the *Albanian League of Lezhë*. George Kastrioti - Skanderbeg was elected its leader, and commander in chief of its armed forces numbering 8,000 warriors.²³

In the light of the modern geopolitical science, the League of Lezhë represented an attempt to form a state union. In fact, this was a federation of independent rulers who undertook the duty to follow a common foreign policy, to defend jointly their independence and recruiting their allied armed forces. Naturally, it all required a collective budget for covering the military expenditures and each family contributed their mite to the common funds of the League.²⁴ As a matter of fact, in our days the KLA was being recruited on the same principle, by collecting a tax from each family..

At the same time, each clan kept its possessions, its autonomy in solving the internal problems of its own estate. The formation and functioning of the League, of which George Kastrioti was the supreme feudal lord or suzerain, was the most significant attempt to build up an all-Albanian resistance against the Ottoman occupation and, simultaneously, an effort to create, for the span of its short-lived functioning, of some sort of a unified Albanian state. It is no chance at all that to this day Skanderbeg is a national hero of the Albanians, and the period of the *Albanian League* has been perceived by the Albanians as a peak in their history, especially if compared with the subsequent failed attempts, until the beginning of the 20th century, to constitute an independent statehood.

We shall not dwell upon the detailed chronology of the intricate military strategies and battles that maintained the independence of the League over several decades in this study. It is of key importance that the successful military operations conducted by Skanderbeg against the Ottoman Empire, allowed him, as a person, and the Albanians, as an ethnos, become an important political agent in the region, particularly in the eyes of the European Christian nations, which were well-aware of the fact that it was the Albanians' stubborn resistance that checked the victorious march of Islam on the West. Skanderbeg maintained permanent foreign relations with Hungary, the Republic of Ragusa, the Holy See, the Kingdom of Naples. Together with his establishment as an international factor, Skanderbeg tried to strengthen the centralist principle in the Albanian League, to consolidate further its human and material resources. It was of particular importance for him to reduce to a minimum the destructive force of clan particularism. The marriage contracted with Andronika, the daughter of Arianit-Comnenos, contributed to a stronger union between these two distinguished aristocratic dynasties. Skanderbeg punished the hesitant princes, deprived them of their possessions, and granted feuds to officers and soldiers, who had distinguished themselves,

thus forming a new military aristocracy. All these steps were aimed at the foundation of a single centralised Albanian state.²⁵

The efforts to develop statehood met with the princes' opposition, for they placed their family interests above anything else. The League's unity began to crack, some of the princes, who feared for their personal authority and possessions, openly took the side of the Ottomans, or declared they were leaving the Albanian League. The treachery of the Albanian aristocrats reached its culmination in 1455-1457, when the League was abandoned by the clans of Arianit, Dukagjin, Balsha, even Skanderbeg's closest companions - Moïse Golem and Hamza Kastrioti.²⁶

Sultan Mohammed II took advantage of the break-up of the League and in 1457 sent against Skanderbeg an army of 80'000 soldiers, under the command of Ishak Bey Evrenoso?lu, joined also by troops led by defector Hamza Kastrioti. The Ottoman forces raided in, burning down and devastating Skanderbeg's estates and advancing on Lezhë. Most of the Albanian lands fell in Ottoman hands. The majority of Skanderbeg's companions attached themselves to the invaders. On 7 September Skanderbeg attacked by surprise and, employing his unsurpassed art of war, inflicted heavy casualties on the Ottoman troops, who had been too confident in their own victory and safety. Many of the Ottoman warriors were killed or taken hostage. Captured was also Hamza Kastrioti.

The brilliant victory over an enemy of highly superior numbers went down in history as the battle of Albulena and had a very big military and political significance. It preserved the independence of the Albanian territories, and, in 1460, Mehmed II even proposed a three-year armistice to Skanderbeg, which the latter accepted. At the same time, it put an end to the princes' hesitations, eliminated their separatist leanings, consolidated once again the League and Skanderbeg's authority.

The international prestige of the Albanian League was on the rise. In the 1460s, unmolested by the Ottomans, Skanderbeg engaged in the rivalries between the dynasties of Aragon and Anjou. Ridiculed by the Prince of Tarenta saying that his troops would be of little help to Ferdinand I of Aragon, Skanderbeg responded by the notable phrase, which became symbolic of the representation of the Albanian heroicity: "Remember that we are the same Epirotes who have fought in different times with the Romans on this very soil on which you now tread, and always in honour and glory, and not in disgrace".²⁷ Skanderbeg crossed into Italy in August 1461 with 1,000 cavalry and 2,000 infantry, dispersed Ferdinand's enemies and stabilised his throne, after which he returned to Albania, having done with credit his duty to Ferdinand's father - Philip of Aragon.²⁸

The years until 1468, when Skanderbeg died, were laden with tension, abounding in delegations and negotiations abroad, and filled with incessant battles. In 1463, misled by the Papacy, Venice and the other states in Italy and Central Europe as to their intentions to organise a crusade against the Ottoman Empire, especially as the campaign was officially proclaimed by Pope Pius II, Skanderbeg broke the peace treaty with Mehmed II. The promised crusade did not take place and the Albanian lands were subjected to a systematic devastation.

Skanderbeg's death on 7 January 1468 made the Albanians abandon all hopes. Many of the feudal lords moved to Italy, vast numbers of peasants (tens of thousands) also emigrated to Italy, forming large colonies in Sicily and Southern Italy, which have persisted down to the present day. Major strongholds like Kruja, Shkodra and some others maintained their resistance for a long time after. In 1467 a huge Ottoman army besieged Kruja, but the garrison stood up for two years. As late as June 1478 the exhausted defenders yielded the fortress. The Ottomans lost so many lives, material resources and efforts that even in the 19th century the Christian Albanians were not allowed to be overtaken by and spend the night in the fortress for fear that it might fall in their hands again.²⁹

Not many are the leaders of the liberation struggle who have enjoyed so wide recognition of their deeds in the course of five centuries as Skanderbeg has. The legend says that, on hearing of Scanderbeg's death, Sultan Mehmed II exclaimed: "At last Europe and Asia belong to me! Poor Christendom. It has lost both its sword and shield!"³⁰

A bibliography published in 1881, contains 185 historical, philosophical and fiction works on Skanderbeg. The new bibliography issued in Tirana on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of

George Kastrioti's death comprises over a thousand titles in twenty-one languages, among which writings in Esperanto.³¹ There appeared in various periods scholarly literature and ideological-aesthetical schools, which argued about approaches and views in the study of the Skanderbeg phenomenon. Although in different historical times and in terms of entirely different outlooks and cultures, both Idris Bitlisi in the early 16th century and F. Voltaire in his treatise *Essai sur les Moeurs et l'Esprit des Nations* of 1756, analyse in a resembling way the astonishing quarter-of-a-century-long resistance of the Albanians. Idris Bitlisi: "It is perhaps because the greater part of the Albanians live in mountainous areas that they have the tough and austere character which does not let them yield to anybody, whatever the circumstances" and Voltaire who argues that the factors underlying Skanderbeg's victories are two - the first, that Albanians are a people of warriors and, the second, that Albania is a highland country.³²

In the philosophical and historical works from the 18th and 19th centuries, Skanderbeg was elevated to the rank of a representative of enlightened absolutism. He was rather a king-philosopher, who rose above the classes and was more of a teacher than a traditional ruler. If we are to trust the texts published by Stefan Zanolli in 1779, under the title of *The Heritage of Skanderbeg*, we are to find in them, among other things, the philosophy of that religious reservation, even indifference as to the fundamental significance and authority of religious faith which are so typical of the Albanians. Skanderbeg was believed to be the author of an extensive instruction addressed to his son Ivan Kastrioti, in which the subject of religion and clergy was given considerable place: "If the Pope tries to increase the number of priests and monks or if he urges you to take the field in defence of the Holy cause, may sooner a thunder fall from the skies on you and your brood, than you agree to it..."³³

Ottoman colonisation and establishment of the new administration

Nearly a century - from the first clashes of the ak'nc's with Avlona in 1383 up to Skanderbeg's death in January 1468, and even as late as 1478, when his rebels submitted the stronghold of Kruja, the Ottoman conquerors were forced to overcome the resistance of the Albanian squads. The slow and difficult establishment of their power over the Albanian territories, along with the prevailing difficult terrain there, were the prerequisites for the strikingly specific ways of withholding the Albanian identity, particularly the singularities of colonisation and the ethnic and religious transformations in these quarters.

Sultan Murad II (1421-1444 and 1446-1451) concluded Mehmed I's campaigns strengthening the feudal order in part of the Albanian lands. The territories of Central and Southern Albania, stretching between the Mat River to the north and Çameria [modern Tsameria, Greece] to the south, were included in a single sancak known from the records and historical works as Arvanid. In 1431 the central authorities decreed that rural and urban households and their property be registered, as well as an inventory of the land holdings in all ten districts of the sancak of Arvanid be completed.³⁴

The feudal cadastre of the *sancak* of Arvanid, which was completed in 1432, contains data on the Ottoman migrants from Anatolia to Albania. In short, those are the earliest records of the colonisation and the penetration of a new ethnic component into this part of the Balkans. It consisted of only a limited number of people from the provinces of Saruhan, Konya, and Canik, whose task was to assume the management of some of the *timars*. The situation in the Albanian territories was complicated and dangerous, the authority - still shaky, and, therefore, among the belligerent Arbëreshes to be granted a feud was in fact an exile rather than a reward for wartime deserts and loyalty to the sultan. *Timars* in the Albanian lands were allocated predominantly to rebellious Anatolians with the purpose of sending them away from the central parts of the Empire,

and, on the other hand, of forming in the turbulent regions the first Muslim nuclei intended to represent the sultan's power and, subsequently, defend the imperial interests.

As evidenced by the records in the Arvanid register, a great number of the feuds were left as hereditary estates of the local families, others were distributed to members of the Albanian military who had joined the new administration.³⁵ Some of the native people, striving to keep their feudal estates or to be quickly promoted in the Ottoman military hierarchy, adopted Islam outright. Others stuck to their Christian faith, but not for long, for they were integrated into the Ottoman military-feudal class and with time if not they themselves then their sons converted to the dominant religion. At this early stage, all village and town dwellers listed in the cadastre were still Christian.

From the second half of the 15th century dates an important fact bearing on colonisation. That is the building of the city of Elbasan: "Then the Master built in the middle of the vilâyet of Arnavud a fortress and called it Ilbasan. He filled it with gazis to fight for the faith with the infidels around."³⁶

It is a long-standing claim of the Turkish historiography that the population in the new towns founded by the Ottoman sultans in the Balkan provinces of the Empire was exclusively Muslim. The settlement of colonists from Anatolia, as well as the Islamisation of the local inhabitants is assumed to have begun with the placement of garrisons and administrative officers there.³⁷ In this way, owing to the new architectural appearance and the Muslim population, these towns became strongholds of the Ottoman power and Islam.

Debatable, though, is whether Elbasan was a town founded by the conquerors. As its Slavonic name of Koniuh suggests, this must have been an older settlement turned by the Ottomans into a fortification and a garrison town. In any case, there is evidence showing that, in order to support the rear of his army, Mehmed II built up in the valley of the Shkumbin River a huge fortress calling it Elbasan, that is to say stamping, trampling on the country. According to I. Duichev, there exist some marginal notes describing the foundation of the town of Elbasan. Thus, a marginal note of 1466 tells about the deportation of citizens of Ohrid to the newly founded Ottoman town, and there is a record from the same year noting down the deportation of denizens of Skopje in order to settle in the new town. In reference to these events of founding and populating the town of Elbasan (Koniuh), there is also an extensive and valuably informative marginal note written by *diak* Dimitër of Kratovo, who copied a code at the demand of archbishop Dorotheos of Ohrid.³⁸ It is an undeniable fact that in the time of Sultan Mehmed II, when the town of Skopje was already losing its importance as a major strategic site in the Balkans, Elbasan, in the surroundings of which battles were still being fought, acquired a leading part in the imperial military plans and became a key site of Mohammedanism. Military garrisons and route detachments were stationed there, certain distinguished members of the local administration were established with their families as well. In fact, this was the Ottoman colonisation of Elbasan, because data about migration of ordinary households from Anatolia are lacking.

There is some evidence that in 1467 Sultan Mehmed II deported from Skopje to Elbasan over fifteen Bulgarian households, probably for doubts as to their trustworthiness, or aspiring to intimidate the unruly Bulgarians in town. These must have been Christian *müsellems*, who had been brought to take part in the construction of Elbasan as masons, stoneworkers, or any other building workers.³⁹ In a similar way, the previous year the sultan also exiled some eminent Ohrid families. This was a result of the deterioration of the relations between the Ottoman administration and the Archbishopric of Ohrid. The Ohrid clergy and the city notables were keenly concerned with the struggle of the Albanians against the Ottoman occupation and were trying to find ways to support it. The archbishops Nicholas and Zachary took advantage of the opportunity of having to go to preach against the Florentine Union and departed for the Albanian lands, where they stayed for a long time with Skanderbeg in the fortress of Kruja. The persecution of the citizens of Ohrid and the expulsion of the ecclesiastics, with the archbishop in the lead, evidenced that the sultan suspected both of some kind of anti-state activity.⁴⁰ Undoubtedly, the

policy of internment, banishment, and resettlement was a common practice for the Sublime Porte and traditionally a well-known procedure in the Balkans.

Regardless of the Muslim character of the new town of Elbasan, it is unlikely for its population to have been homogenous in composition. In the 17th century the population of the city increased to the size of 2,000 households. This large number was due above all to native Albanians who had adopted Islam. One should not ignore evidence that it was precisely in Elbasan and its neighbourhood where the Crypto-Christians, Islamised Albanians professing in secret their old religion, were concentrated.

At first the aggressive aspirations of the Ottomans were directed towards the large ports along the Adriatic coast which were actively engaged in the Mediterranean trade. One of the first to fall under Ottoman power, as early as 1417, was the city of Avlona situated on the southeastern shore. It was a busy trade centre, exporter of cereals, wood material, salt and other products from the interior to Dubrovnik and the Italian republics. A new administration was immediately established in Avlona and its officials hurried to impose their control over the trade activity of the citizens of Dubrovnik and the local merchants - Christians and Jews. Being interested in the considerable revenues obtained from trading, the Ottomans took measures that business would not stop with their settlement in this town. Even the new governor of Avlona himself contributed to the further intensive growth of trade following the 1420s, 1430s, and 1440s. The result of this stimulative policy was a special ferman issued in 1430 by Sultan Murad II under which the merchants from Dubrovnik were granted freedom to trade "all over my kingdom's territory and do business wherever they want to across the western and the eastern parts, both by land and by sea, in the Serbian and Albanian lands, in Bosnia, and in all lands and towns... and to pay custom duty under the law and let nobody stand in their way".⁴¹

Generally speaking, the seaside centres of trade were on the decline after their occupation by the Ottomans. On the one hand, because during the conquest the population was fleeing from the coastal areas and this, in turn, disrupted production and commercial activity. On the other hand, the introduction of the military-feudal system in the coastal areas, like anywhere else in the vast Ottoman Empire, was an impeding factor for commodity production and the growth of trade because of its restrictive character, although it did not stop them completely and deliberately.

According to the sources, however, Avlona reached its zenith as a commercial centre in the 15th century, when it had already been conquered by the Ottomans, unlike Durrës, for example, whose activity by that period began to decline. Yet, an important factor here was probably the more flexible and independent policy of the local administration, which derived benefits from Avlona's prosperity. An essential fact is that despite the town's foreign government, commercial activity was left in the hands of the local and the Dubrovnik business circles. Avlona preserved its Christian character during that period.

If we go back to the records of the Arvanid register of 1432 containing data about the interior of Southern Albania, we would find out that the size of colonisation was insignificant. Even if there had been any initial designs to transfer colonists to the Albanian lands, the Ottoman sultans failed to implement them - because of shortage of men, because of the complicated political situation and the inaccessible terrain. There is some evidence of the movement of only a certain number of *mustahf*?zes (soldiers in the fort garrisons) from Asia Minor. In exchange for their service they were given *timars* and so they joined the class of the Ottoman feud holders in the *sancak* of Arvanid. Most of the *mustahf*?zes of the fortress of Skrapar led by *dizdar* Karaca were migrants from the Saruhan area of Asia Minor. They were remunerated with not very large feuds comprising lands inhabited by an entirely Christian population. Beside the garrison soldiers, migrants from Anatolia, there were also Albanians serving at the fortification: Gjin, son of Todor, Nikor, Peter, Niko, etc.

In the 15th century, although Albania was under Ottoman rule, the population in Argyrocastro (Gjirokastër) and the neighbouring villages, in the *vilâyet* of Kartalos, etc., remained Christian Orthodox and the colonisation was only minimal. The overall ethnic and religious configuration,

assembled on the basis of sources, indicates that Southern Albania preserved its pre-Ottoman characteristics, including distinctions in the field of toponymy and onomastics.⁴²

In the northern Albanian lands, included in the *sancak* of Iskenderiyye (modern Shkodër), the Ottoman colonisation did leave some traces. Administratively, the sancak of Shkodra was divided into two *vilâyets* - Shkodra, with six *kazas* pertaining to it, and Durrës, with four *kazas*. The registration of the population and the land in this region involved great difficulties, since the people living here were the independent highlanders - the Catholic Albanians, who did not allow the sultan's officers into their free territories. Besides, many of the north Albanian clans presented themselves to the central authority as true Muslims, while in reality they observed the Catholic rites, that is they were a typical example of Crypto-Christians. This circumstance further complicated their relations with the Ottoman administration, and in fact it was impossible for the cadastre to describe accurately their religious affiliation.

Irrespective of the long-standing aspirations of the Empire to fully subjugate the Shkodra region as a strategic area near the Adriatic coast, it may be assumed that in the highlands the Ottoman administration was either not functioning at all, or only formally established. The *sancak* of Shkodra was administratively formed and officially annexed to the Balkan provinces of the Empire after the fall of the fortress of Rozafat in 1479, and the first detailed register of its lands, was compiled in 1485. In practice, this area was conquered by the Ottomans long before the seizure of the town of Shkodra itself.

The ratio of nearly five thousand Christian households to only sixty-nine Muslim undoubtedly speaks of a very insignificant presence of migrants from Anatolia in this region. It should be noted here, however, that the Ottoman settlers were seeking to get established in compact groups and, whenever possible, to found separate settlements. People's natural desire to feel the safety of their own environment in these alien, conquered by force, territories made it easier for the Ottoman administration, because in case of need it was possible to quickly and easily call the Anatolian Turks to the colours of the *sancakbey*. Therefore, the dispersion of Muslim households - one, two or three in a village, according to the Ottoman registers, is sooner an evidence of single cases of local people having adopted Islam. Sometimes those Muslims were the representatives appointed by the community or the clans to maintain official contacts with the Ottoman administration, who made an appearance of obedience and loyalty and in fact guaranteed the parallel self-government of the community.

With regard to the subject discussed, the presence of the following notes found in the Ottoman cadastre of 1485 might be of interest. Entered in the records are ten *timars* (land holdings) held by Christians who had the title of *kaznes* before their names.⁴³ It was used both in written documents and in the spoken Albanian language as early as the 14th century with the meaning of elder, *voyvoda* in the highlands. These Christians were chiefs of *katuns* (settlements of a tribal community or of cattle-breeding tribes in the mountainous parts of Northern Albania), and the villages they lived in, which were under their charge, were registered, no doubt on paper alone, as their *timars*. This was dictated by the wish of the central power to have at least minimum control over and contact with the population of the independent mountain communities by incorporating in some measure the community chiefs into its micro-administrative-governmental system. I focus my attention on this particular structure of power relations with the central authority, because they have been transferred to the modern times, especially in the province of Kosovo. The chief, entered in the register as *timar*-holder - *de jure* an Ottoman *spahi* under direct command, in fact defended the interests of these closed village communities which tolerated no alien presence and interference, and at the same time maintained contacts with the official power, seeing to the prompt collection and payment of taxes and the regular recruitment of soldiers for the Ottoman army. There is no evidence as to how strictly the chiefs fulfilled their duties, but certainly the central administration was unable to hold them responsible in any serious way. . Although this type of feudal estate was legalised as a *timar* and everywhere in the registers it is specified that the holders are *spahis* (that is subject to military service to the Empire), this is undoubtedly a specific

form of execution of the Ottoman power taking into account the norms of the local customary law, the social and territorial system of the Albanians.

Sometimes the central authority placed greater trust in some Albanian chiefs putting on record ten or more villages under their charge, and in these cases the local traditional laws were not violated. Primary power in the villages was executed according to the local custom by the elders of the villages (for example *kaznes* Petri, son of Nike in the village of Drezka, *kaznes* Radic, son of Rashko in the village of Merka, etc), who, in turn, were under the authority of the governor of the respective villages (in the mentioned case - *spahi* Bozhidar, son of Vukote).⁴⁴

It is clear that the Albanians imposed their own model of seeming submission and actual self-government. In the territories of the sancak of Shkodra, for example, the settlement of migrants from Anatolia, as well as the establishment of Ottoman administrative officers and military garrisons were unthinkable. The highland territories were governed by local, parallel, institutions, and only externally and fictitiously - by the central and local Ottoman authorities and judicial institutions

The inventories of the population in the *katuns* belonging to the *sancak* of Shkodra, provide evidence about the absolute lack of Ottoman population groups in this region and about the ethnic and religious homogeneity of the local people in the late 15th century. Of course, when referring here and further in the text, to homogeneity of the population, we do not differentiate between or analyse the proportions of the Albanian and Slav population in this region because of the notably motley picture clearly reflected in the Ottoman tax registers.

Based again on the Ottoman registers, one could trace the tendency of conversion to Islam of the local population. For example, the garrison guarding the fortress of Dergoz (Drishti) consisted of eighteen men including the *kethüda* of the stronghold. All of them were Muslims, but the characteristics of their patronyms show that most of them were Islamised Albanians or Slavs (Hamza Debri, Süleyman Matje, Ahmed Radomiri, Karagöz Mure, Ilyas Kline, etc.). Obviously, the impossibility of colonisation of the Albanian lands by Ottomans from Anatolia forced the authority to rely on the service and loyalty of the Islamised indigenous population.⁴⁵

Another portion of the north Albanian lands was included in the *sancak* of Debar, namely Kruja, Debar and the areas lying between the rivers of Mat and Black Drin. The bulky register of this *sancak* is another confirmation of the limited scope of the Ottoman colonisation in Northern Albania. The lack of Ottoman administrative officials in the *sancak* of Debar, as well as the low density of the Christian population in the villages during the second half of the 15th century resulted from the long-lasting resistance of the native people, taking into consideration that this province was the centre of the insurrectionary campaigns of the Albanian and Slav population against the conquerors. The great number of villages in the neighbourhood of Kruja, entered as Akçahisar in the Ottoman *defters*, which were registered in the inventories as deserted - over 27 altogether, evidenced that the price of the stubborn Albanian resistance against the Ottoman expansion was high. From a demographic point of view, the negative consequences were a great number of deaths, flights from the devastated areas, hundreds of abducted into slavery, thousands of migrants to the Italian coast and adoption of Islam by most of the princes, former companions in arms of Skanderbeg.⁴⁶

In the first half of the 16th century the Albanian lands still maintained their Christian character - Orthodox and Catholic. The Muslim population increased insignificantly and that mainly through the Islamisation of the indigenous population. In some of the Albanian towns or districts the Muslims were reinforced by *Yürüks* sent in there to serve as labourers, but this was actually a nomadic, temporarily resident population. Thus, for example, *Yürüks* were being sent to the ports around Delvina (Southern Albania), where they were employed to repair the sailing boats and load the merchandise on board. In 1547 the *Yürüks* from Ovce Polje worked in the mines at Dukagjin, Kamenovo, etc.⁴⁷ According to data published by Ö. Barkan, concerning the period of 1520-1535, the Christian population in the sancak of Elbasan ran up to 94.5 per cent. In the sancak of Shkodra, during the same period the Christians accounted for 95.5 per cent of the total

population. In the sancak of Dukagjin, which embraced parts of Northern Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo and Metohija, there were no followers of Islam registered at all.⁴⁸

From 1593 to 1606 a war was waged by the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire. In 1594 the Pope in Rome insisted that the highland Albanian Catholics should rise up in arms. In the month of June in the Mat monastery an assembly of the leaders of a number of provinces and towns in Albania were called together to work out a plan for an armed uprising. Relying on support from the Pope and from Spain, some ten thousand people, armed with bows and swords, attacked the Turkish troops in Albania. Once again the Albanians did not receive the expected help, failed to withstand the well-armed Ottoman detachments, and in 1596 their uprising was crushed.⁴⁹ Naturally, this led to repression on the part of the Ottomans and activated the spread of Islam among the local population.

From the late 16th and the early 17th century the military feudal system could no longer provide the conditions the Ottoman Empire needed to carry through its plans for expansion and withstand the ever strengthening European states. On the other hand, the interests of the big feudal lords in the Empire were increasingly directed to the unconditional forms of private land ownership and, naturally, they tried to find any ways to counteract the traditional centralised monopoly over the land. This all led to the decay of the military feudal system and to substantial changes in the agrarian regime of the Ottoman state. When in some places the *spahi* feuds began to be transformed into other types of landed property, the *timar* records were no longer kept so strictly. Smaller became the number, as well as the importance of the inventories. The few and incomplete *defters* of that period did not include most of the productive population of the Empire and are therefore less reliable as a source of information on the ethnic and religious changes in the Albanian lands.

In fact, during the 17th and 18th centuries there was no longer colonisation in the concrete sense of this term. The migration of Ottomans from Anatolia had long ceased, or came down to economic migration of separate families. In the 17th century, mostly as a result of the spread of Islam, the Muslim population in Albania constituted already 30 per cent of the total native population.

In the period of the conquest the central Ottoman administration applied the customary forms of colonisation - establishment of garrisons, settlement of representatives of the military and administrative power, and of religious functionaries. . It failed, however, to follow a purposeful colonisation policy with respect to Albania. The negligible size of colonisation in the Albanian territories allowed the Albanians to avoid any measure of assimilation or Turkisation and to preserve the pre-Ottoman aspect of their lands until as late as the 17th century. In the subsequent centuries the political aspirations of the Ottoman power, along with the native peculiarities of folk psychology, mentality and complex identity, determined a rather dynamic process of Islamisation.

The Islamisation of the Albanians and its impact on the Albanian religious identity.

Important factors facilitating the dissemination and adaptation of Islam among the Albanians were the local religious specifics and the peculiarities in the religious identity of the native inhabitants. Prior to the Ottoman conquest, the southern Albanians (Tosks) were Orthodox Christians under the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The northern Albanians - Gëgs, were Catholics under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Holy See. The Albanian language was also divided into two large dialect groups - northern and southern. The northern, Geg language bordered predominantly on Slavic languages; the southern, Tosk, on the modern Greek. The boundary between the two dialects was marked by the river of Shkumbin. Here, along the contact line between the two dialect groups was formed the relatively newer and intermediate Elbasan dialect. The ethnographic and linguistic differences between the North and the South have served as an argument for many scholars studying Albania, who base their research on the specific political

and cultural-historical features, to speak of a certain autonomy of the two regions - Gegëria and Toskëria.⁵⁰

The tribal and clan-related cultural-historical differences between the southern and northern Albanians were reinforced by the disunion resulting from the active Catholic propaganda. The rivalry between the two churches left deep traces in the spiritual identity of the Albanians. The Albanians' subordination now to the Holy See, now to the Patriarchate, the incessant strife for domination between the two churches drove Albanians to ideological doubts and even to religious indifference, which was an impediment to the formation of an integral Christian outlook.

Islam, reinforced by the influence of the attractive practices of the Muslim sects, as well as by a great number of social and economic factors, gained ground among the Albanian population conspicuous for its feeble religious commitment.

The specific religious indifference is also manifested in the Albanians who converted to Islam. Scholars unanimously reject whatever presence of religious fanaticism among them. This is in contrast with the religious devotion of the Islamised population in other Balkan provinces - in Bosnia, Macedonia, and the Rhodopes. It could be, judging by Skanderbeg's testament, that reservation to religion was of a political character, since many times in the course of their struggle for independence the Albanians had been misled or deceived by the Catholic West, while they had never relied on the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The lack of deep religiousness in the Albanians has been pre-determined in large measure by the significance of the *fis*, by the overwhelmingly clan character of their traditions and customs. Foreign travellers and observers in the Albanian territories have perceived as curiosity the circumstance that the patron's days - for example, St. George's and St. Nicholas' feast days were celebrated together by Catholics, Orthodox believers and Muslims. The difference in the ritual was insignificant: the Catholics lit candles as they did on all other holidays, while the Muslims used to throw in the fire a piece of wax of the size sufficient to make a candle. The role of the church in the worship of saints was minor, church feast days were much humbler than these of the family and clan. It was of basic significance that each *fis*, regardless of its religious commitment, had its own patron saint. For example, the Berisha *fis* worshipped Virgin Mary whom they called Lady Berisha and celebrated the clan festival on the day of the Assumption (15 August). The Merturi clan called the Holy Virgin *Lady Merturi* and observed the *fis* patron's day on 8 September, the day of the Nativity of Mary. The Thaçi clan venerated St. John on 27 December, and the Krasniqe revered St. Sebastian on 20 January, etc. It is perfectly clear that this practice was very far from the religious worship of saints as prescribed by the canons of the Catholic and Orthodox religious doctrines, and that it was laden with entirely different tribal-patriarchal and social-ritual meaning.⁵¹

The significance of kinship, clan, brotherhood had grown into a serious, rich and branched, ideological system which rested upon the Kanun of Lek, and the Code of Skanderbeg, ousting any attempt at domination by some other ideology in the Albanians' value system. The *fis*, or the brotherhood, tolerated no influences, no intrusion by alien elements. They even had their own graveyards where no member of another brotherhood or clan could be buried.

Especially typical of the tribal system is collective liability. In a trial, which, in conformity with customary law, requires the defendant's "vow of negation" - "I have not committed this", the jury are selected from among the *vllaznija* or *vëllasëri* (brotherhood) of the accused, because customary law did not recognise the individual as a legal entity, such was, in its perception, the collective of relatives holding equal responsibility for the wrong-doing of one of its members.⁵²

Obviously, the legal system effective among the Albanians in the period of the Ottoman rule, was far from the dogmas of Sheriat law.

The official Sunni Islam in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire was maintained prevalently by the upper classes, the administrative and religious functionaries. In the adoption of Islam by the Balkan Christians, a much more essential part was played by the Muslim sects whose rituals and rite system were closer to folk beliefs. Even the period of the Seljuk Sultanate in Anatolia, saw an expansion of Islam in consequence of the spread and influence of mysticism,

Sufism, and the dervish orders from the mid-13th century, a process that intensified even further in the 14th century. Although the Sufi orders differed from one another, they shared the quality of approaching religious life emotionally rather than in a legal-dogmatic way. The followers of Sufism believe it is possible to achieve immediate communion of man with God with the help of contemplation, one's personal qualities and individual experience. As a matter of fact, by its simplicity this view makes Sufism attractive to broad social strata. The philosophy of Sufism built into the fundamentals of Islam a new conceptual layer, more distant from dogmas and more open to man. Sufi adherents performed primarily mystic rituals that appealed to both the lower and the more educated social classes.⁵³

The Sufi-dervish orders were the most persistent agents of the worship of saints. In this way they met a basic need of the broad lower strata of society for protection and support against the injustices of earthly ways and rulers. The dervish brotherhoods established their *tekkes* and *zavyes* usually near the tomb of some righteous person (or fighter for the faith and justice), who was very soon declared holy. At the same time, the Muslim sects were religiously tolerant in celebrating some Christian saints who were close to their own martyrs by moral qualities, exploits and "miracles".⁵⁴ This attracted the people from the neighbourhood to the tekkes, while the *ʔeyhs* and dervishes suggested to them that religions and rituals were not differing greatly or at least that the invisible meaning of values and philosophy were very close to one another, no matter whether they were Judaic, Christian or Muslim in origin. All endeavours by theologians and by the authorities to put an end to the sanctification of new saints in popular Islam, failed. Their efforts to end the overgrowing of Islamic rituals with local customs and traditions were of no avail either, and controversies in the sphere of dogmas, as usual, wound up in compromise.⁵⁵

The religious ideas taught by dervish missionaries, actively assimilated the local traditions. Islamic and Christian beliefs and practices were mutually adapted to each other and thus the formal conversion of the Balkan population from Christianity to the new faith was made easier. In folk religious practices both in Anatolia and the Balkans the Christian and Muslim saints belonged to the same category of religious phenomena. That is why it was a common occurrence in the Balkans for Christians to visit the holy places worshipped by the Muslims, and very often the latter sought spiritual satisfaction in the ancient Christian sanctuaries. Equally frequently were attended by the two religious groups the shared places of worship.

The Muslim sects were built on a common foundation, although there were some differences in rituality and attire, as well as in their interior organisation and rules of behaviour. Most of them had adopted certain features of the pre-Islamic religions and beliefs - shamanism, Christianity, Judaism, while some were influenced by the heresies spread in Asia Minor and the Balkans assimilating elements from their doctrines and rites - for example, from Manicheism. Mysticism is at the root of the *Bektashi* and other Sufi orders, which actually represented the foundation of Islam in Albania, Macedonia, and some parts of Bulgaria. Mysticism arose on Islamic ground, although in it there are traces of various influences, including Zoroastrianism and some Indian beliefs, and Judaism. Hellenistic doctrines, especially pantheism and Neo-Platonism had a strong impact in the shaping of Sufi philosophy. The establishment of Muslim mysticism as a manifold and complex syncretic ideological structure which, at the same time, is not alien to democracy and dedicated opposition to the official ideologies, respectively, authority, was a prerequisite for the wide spread of some sects in the Balkans. Furthermore, religious propaganda of the dervish brotherhoods was successful with the native people, because Sufism expressed an eternal striving for social justice, human dignity and spiritual perfection. Of course, a factor for the popularity of these orders was the extremely strong tie between the brotherhoods which covered the Balkans like a web, built up their hierarchy, determined the major network centres, contributed to the natural rise of secondary networks in the rural areas, etc. As a matter of fact, this organisation, which has not always been recorded in documents, has been functioning to this day disregarding international borders and the conventions of contemporary geopolitics.⁵⁶

The adaptation of Islam in Albania was furthered by the *Bektashi* sect, which, with its relative democracy and openness, came close to the religious beliefs of Albanian Christians. Its centre

became Elbasan. *Bektashism* was one of the popular forms of Islam in Northeastern Bulgaria and Macedonia, too. Its spiritual centre in Macedonia was Tetovo. In this place, according to D. Gadzhanov's studies, were also found other orders - such as the *Kadiriyye*, *Rifa'iyye*, *Halvetiyye*, *Nakshibendiyye*, etc. It may be asserted that all of Macedonia was sectarian, its western parts being home chiefly to the *tekkes* and centres of the *Bektashi* and *Hayati* (a subsection of the *Halvetiyye*).⁵⁷

In Kosovo, like in Albania, Islam was disseminated through the order of Hacı Bektash, while in Bosnia the Sunnis predominated, the *Mevlevi* order being held in highest esteem. In fact, today the centre of administration of the *Bektashi* order in the Balkans is situated in Tirana, and some of the richest, in spirit and tradition, *Bektashitekkes* are to be found in Tetovo and Djakovica. (During the war in Kosovo in the late spring of 1999, the tekke in Djakovica was set on fire by the Serb police or by a paramilitary unit, and part of the library was destroyed.)

In Albania the campaigns of forcible dissemination of Islam were only exceptions, since these clearly did not have the anticipated effect. The Ottoman campaigns during the conquest of Albania usually ended in land desolation, abduction into slavery, and imposition of Islam. The campaigns of 1464 and 1465 brought devastation to the Albanians. These campaigns were undertaken in the summer, in the harvest season, and finished off by burning down the fields and bringing ruin, by driving away the cattle, and taking the captured people into slavery. Particularly difficult was 1466, when the Albanian lands were invaded by sultan Mehmed II followed by his entire army. Turkish chronicler Kemal Pashadze mentions that "because of the heavy losses inflicted on them by the Albanians, the Ottomans showed appalling ferocity here and even left no vegetation on the ground".⁵⁸ During these campaigns seeking to subjugate Albania, in spite of the outrages, Islam was being spread among the native population only incidentally, occasionally. During that period, Islam was adopted mainly by the feudal clans trying to preserve their lands and consolidate their privileged positions.

Under Sultan Mehmed II Fatih (the Conqueror) the non-Muslim religious communities were allowed. At that time the situation of people professing different religions was better within the boundaries of the Empire than in some countries in Western Europe.⁵⁹ When in the beginning of the 16th century Sultan Selim I decided to impose Islam on all Christians by force, his plan failed, because the patriarch of Constantinople referred to the code of Sultan Mehmed II, which guaranteed certain autonomy to non-Muslim communities. Helpful were also protests by the members of the high Muslim religious circles, as well as by the janissaries.

Typical is the case of the large-scale Islamisation in the unruly region of Reka, lying to the north of Debar. Here the Sublime Porte resorted to the spread of Islam as a method of pacification. Reka fell under Ottoman power in 1460. According to the first *timar* registers for this territory from 1467, its sparse population was Christian only. It comprised motley groups of Albanians, Slavs, and Wallachians. In the beginning and the middle of the 16th century several consecutive uprisings broke out. In 1573 the *kadi* of Elbasan sent a report to the sultan on the need to draw the local population to the true faith in order to appease them at long last. The results of the measures applied became apparent in the next register of the region from 1582. As many as 170 Muslim households, of which 160 newly converted to Islam, were listed in it.⁶⁰

One of the early forms of nonforcible conversion to Islam and substitution of the cultural identity was the gradual incorporation of the local aristocracy into the Ottoman military-feudal class. This naturally required some kind of compromise with certain dogmas of the Muslim doctrine with a view to the expansionist objectives of the empire. One way or another, typical of the early period of the consolidation of the power in the Balkans is the motley character of the military detachments recruited into the Ottoman army. Once fallen under partial dependence on the sultan, the Balkan nobility, in their striving to prevail over their rivals, as well as to preserve or expand their estates, gradually turned into Ottoman feudal tenants. Data on feudal lords who supported the foreign power are found in the correspondence between the patriarch of Constantinople and the archbishop of Ohrid dating back to the beginning of 15th century. In his commentary to this evidence Prof. H. Geltzer writes: "...What a strong power of attraction has the young, full of

energy Turkish state exerted, especially on the Slav and Albanian notables in the Balkan Peninsula... One has to remember that this was the time when Bulgarian, Serbian and Albanian notables abandoned Christianity in droves and adopted Islam."⁶¹

One finds records of the local feudal lords converted to Islam even in the earliest Albanian *timar* registers. In the *defter* of the *sancak* of Arvanid of 1432, over 50 per cent of the recorded *spahis* were Islamised Albanian aristocrats, sultan's and bey's slaves.⁶² In the *sancak* of Shkodra among the dozens of feud-holders in 1485 there was one convert to Islam, Zaim Ayas Bey, son of Kuke. In the same year, out of 107 *timar*-holders in this *sancak*, eight were Muslims of Albanian origin - H?z?r Jovan, Hasan Arnaut, Mustafa Hrac, Hasan Marin, etc.⁶³ . In 1467, the local lords converted to Islam accounted for eight per cent of the *timar*-holders in the *sancak* of Debar.⁶⁴ Even in the fortress of Dergoz at least half of the garrison offices in the regular Ottoman occupation troops were filled by local people who had adopted Islam.⁶⁵ In the *vilâyet* of Akçahisar (modern Krujë, Kruja), along with the five Christian *spahis* who shared the holding of two *timars*, in 1467 there were two new Muslims - Ilyas and Dogan.⁶⁶

The Albanians were greatly valued as soldiers by the Ottoman military system and provided recruits for some of the elite corps of the Ottoman army. *Levends* (sailors) were generally recruited from among the Turkish youths and were given special training. Ottoman records, however, reveal that the Albanians were subject to regular enlistment in the *levend* forces.

Correspondence from 1693 evidences of the directions issued by the central authorities requiring the mobilisation of 1000 Arnauts in the mentioned year from the *sancaks* of Avlona and Delvin (today's Delvina) as recruits for the *levend* troops. In compensation, there came an order that the households of the conscripts should be exempted from the *avariz* and *nüzul* taxes. Enclosed were the lists of the locations and number of households obligated to provide the *levend* enrolment. For example, 54 households in the town of Avlona had to send 27 recruits, while 333 households in the town of Delvin were levied with providing 166 men, etc.⁶⁷

The sultan's guards, too, were predominantly recruited from among the Albanians. Though isolated from their compatriots, the Albanians never lost awareness of their ethnic and clan identity. They were referred to by the administration and entered in the official records as Arnauts, which was a mark of their origin. This was largely due to the fact that no matter how loyal champions of the Ottoman state they were, they never became fanatic Muslims, and in their value system the sense of affiliation to the Albanian North or South, or to a particular family, as well as the soldier's duties stood higher than religious beliefs. In this sense, the description given by Lady Mary Montagu in the first years of the 18th century is illustrative and accurate: "But of all the religions I have seen, the Arnaut seems to me the most particular. They are natives of Arnaoutlich, the ancient Macedonia, and still retain something of the courage and hardiness, though they have lost the name, of Macedonians, being the best militia in the Turkish empire, and they only check upon the janissaries. They are foot soldiers; we had a guard of them, relieved in every considerable town we passed: they are all clothed and armed at their own expense, generally lusty young fellows, dressed in clean white coarse cloth, carrying guns of a prodigious length, which they run with on their shoulders as if they did not feel the weight of them, the leader singing a sort of rude tune, not unpleasant, and the rest making up the chorus. These people, living between Christians and Mahometans, and not being skilled in controversy, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best; but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both and go to the mosques on Fridays and the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse, that at the day of judgement they are sure of protection from the true prophet; but which that is, they are not able to determine in this world. I believe there is no other race of mankind have so modest an opinion of their own capacity. These are the remarks I have made on the diversity of religions I have seen..."⁶⁸

Islam began to spread first in the urban centres. The more complex nature of urban life spurred town-dwellers to adopt the rulers' religion. The influence of Islam was felt there first. On the one hand, the cities were the first centres of the conquerors' administration and target of colonisation. On the other hand, they were places of concentration of Christians and Jews owning large

moneyed capital. Their basic ambition in the new social and political setting within the framework of the dominant Muslim state system was to further retain their leading positions.

In the early period following the conquest of the Balkan towns, up to the middle of the 16th century, when the Ottomans believed it was their right and duty first of all to consolidate their power in the new territories and their participation in the later campaigns of conquest, the propertied urban groups managed to keep their predominance in the most important activities - tax farming, trading, crafts, etc.

In the second half of the 16th century, parallel with the spread of Islam, the holders of money capital who professed Islam gained strong positions in the cities. The role of the Christians began to decline and they were forced to give up their place in the key economic activities to their Muslim fellow-citizens. In order to keep their positions, the most powerful Christian urban classes strove for proximity with the Muslim ruling crust by way of Islamisation.

In the villages, unlike the towns, the spread of Islam began much later and followed its intrinsic rules, forms and motives. The delayed diffusion of Islam in the rural areas was mainly due to objective factors. The colonisation, especially in the Albanian highlands, did not affect so directly the rural population as it did the urban one. Wherever Ottoman settlers moved in, they aimed to establish separate colonies and live in relative isolation from the local population. The rural structures were characterised by isolation, which was quite pronounced in some places (especially in the highland areas), and which was hardly susceptible to outside influence. Very strong in the rural communities was the tradition of strict abiding by the customary law, of observance of the clan or mundane religious rites, of preserving their inherited, generation-old moral value system. The more or less homogeneous social structure of the rural population was also a factor making the cases of conversion to the dominant religion by personal and social motives, so characteristic of the urban areas, isolated and untypical in the countryside.

The Ottoman authority did not aim to impose Islam among the rural populace forcibly and on a mass scale, since such an act would have harmed seriously the military and economic interests of the state. Bosnia made an exception, on political and military-strategic grounds, although the amount of the *cizye*, and some other taxes collected in this province, were valued high as revenues to the treasury, and no violent measures were applied. Ottoman centralism rarely resorted to campaigns for the spread of Islam. In Albania and Kosovo, where colonisation was scarce, and at places it was limited to the settlement of representatives of the Ottoman administration and the establishment of garrisons, Islamisation began latest in time. As evidenced by the reports of the Vatican Catholic inspectors, by the first decade of the 17th century only 10 per cent of the population in the Albanian North were Muslims.⁶⁹

A large-scale and comparatively rapid change in the religious identity of the Albanians, especially in the mountain rural communities, was in progress in the mid- and late 17th century and, with varying intensity, during the 18th century. In a sense, the abandonment of Catholicism and the Orthodox faith by the Albanians was formal and employed as a conscious strategic move aiming at their survival and admittance to the hierarchy of the local Ottoman administration. Furthermore, this explains the presence of dual religious identity among the Gegs, but also among the Tosks in the South. Crypto-Christian behaviour was characteristic of the Albanian territories in the period from the 17th up to the late 19th century. In order to evade interference by the Ottoman administration in their home affairs, in their austere clan traditions of hierarchy and communal self-government, many Albanian clans, especially among the mountaineers in the North, adopted Islam formally and lived as dual-faith believers, just as in the description given by Lady Montagu. Along with the new religion they continued to celebrate the old Christian festivals and saints, baptised their children, took Holy Communion, married Christian women, practices strictly forbidden by the Sheriat prescriptions. Bishop Zmajevi? established that "there is a vicious and disdainful custom to give Holy Communion to those who, in order to evade taxation, publicly profess Mohammedanism, and secretly - the Christian faith, infecting others by their example..."⁷⁰ It is difficult to determine the role of the Catholic and Orthodox priests as shepherds of their flock, when the latter adopted Islam or sank into practising dual faith. According to M.

Drinov's remarks, based on correspondence of Catholic envoys from their Albanian missions, the level of performance of the Catholic priests was extremely inadequate and they were often the first to adopt Islam and lead their flocks into conversion. Catholic priest Stefan Gaspari toured the Albanian eparchies in 1671-1672 and wrote that "the unworthy Catholic priests had not only been unable to maintain the faith in their flock, but also had utterly exterminated it by their foul life." In the eparchy of Dra? [modern Durrës] he met many Crypto-Christians, designated in the original by the Latin term of *christiani occulti*, who "overtly professed the Mohammedan faith, and secretly attended church to pray, confess their sins and take Holy Communion".⁷¹ Other scholars, like A. Zhelyazkova, to a degree P. Bartl and St. Skendi, hold the thesis that the local Catholic priests were closely linked with or were part of the family and clan ties in the highland communities and made efforts to be of service to their congregation. When, towards the middle of the 18th century, Pope Benedict XIV demanded in a special bull that the renegades, observing in secret the faith of their ancestors, should renounce Islam in public and profess Christianity openly, the population offered violent resistance to it, fully supported by their clerics.⁷²

As for the Orthodox priests, they were not only notorious for their ignorance, but also for the abuse of church tax collection. Besides, both the Catholic and the Orthodox population were levied with special taxes and duties. Since the time of Sultan Mehmed II, with the integration of the Orthodox Church in the system of the central Ottoman power, the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople exacted a heavy fiscal regime on all Christians. Part of the church taxes were collected with a view of paying out what was known as *peshkesh* - a sum contributed by the Greek patriarchs to the state treasury in return for their right to be assigned to their position with an official document (*berat*). Along with these sums, the size of which was constantly growing, the Orthodox population gave also ecclesiastical *miri rüsüm*, comprising taxes and duties received by the metropolitans from the eparchies under their jurisdiction. There were a great number of other taxes collected on a voluntary or compulsory basis. Their collectors acted with the assistance and under the protection of the local Ottoman administrative bodies, usually bribed to turn a blind eye to malpractice.

St. Skendi, who has studied Crypto-Christianity, considers that fear of persecution was by no means a reason for the conversion of Albanians to Islam and the emergence of dual faith. They were rather led by their wish to evade paying per capita tax and benefit from proselytism, namely - to be given a post in the military administrative hierarchy of the Ottoman state.⁷³ Indeed, from the middle of the 17th century the Sublime Porte found out the only measure by which to punish the insurgent Albanians - through a drastic increase in taxes. If the tax levied on the Christians in the Albanian communities in the 16th century amounted to about 45 *akçes*, in the middle of the 17th century it ran up to 780 *akçes* a year. In order to save the clans from hunger and ruin, the Albanian elders advised the people in the villages to adopt Islam. Nevertheless, the willingness of the Gëgs to support the campaigns of the Catholic West against the Empire, did not abate. In his report to Cardinal Gozzadino, the Albanian bishop and writer Pjetër Budi informed in 1621 that scores of men in Albania, Christians, but also Muslims, were ready to take arms, given the smallest help from the Catholic West.

In this context, the motives for the complex dual religious identity of the Albanians become clear. Emblematic is the case of the Crypto-Christians inhabiting the inaccessible geographical areas around Berat, Shpat and Gnjilane (Alb. Gjilan). Undisturbed by the Ottoman authorities, the people from Shpat and four villages near Gnjilane maintained for a long time their religiously dualised existence. The central power came to know about them only in 1846, and by chance, when two recruits from these parts declared they were actually Christians, hence could not serve in the Ottoman army. The Sublime Porte conducted an inquiry and then, forced by circumstances, the local people, guided by their priest Antonio Markovi?, openly declared themselves to be Christians. Those who survived the ensuing repression were exiled to Asia Minor. As for the Crypto-Christians from Shpat, some five thousand people, they were able to revert to the Orthodox faith, without risking their lives, only in 1897.⁷⁴

A fairly accurate picture of religious self-awareness in Albania is presented by the general consul of Belgium in Thessaloniki in 1888. According to his statistics, the proportion of religious believers in Albania was the following: Geg Muslims (Northern Albania) - 370,000 people, Tosk Muslims (Southern Albania) - 250,000, Catholics - 253,000, and Orthodox Christians - 150,000.⁷⁵ In fact, there probably are some incorrect data in this statistics, because in the beginning of the 20th century the Muslims constituted 70 per cent, the Orthodox Albanians - around 20 per cent, and the Catholics - 10 per cent of the total population.⁷⁶ According to the latest census held in April 1989, the population of Albania is 3 182, 417 persons, the same proportions of Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics being revealed. With reference to Albanians' religious indifference, E. Biberaj points out that Albanians favour their ethnic-national identification, rather than their religious one. The modern Albanian is often heard saying: "The religion of the Albanians is Albanian-ness."⁷⁷

The Balkans Revival in the 19th century and the Albanian patriotic ideas.

The rise of national and patriotic ideas in Albania came late. Even in the second half of the 19th century Albanians were far from the ideal of a homogeneous nation. The growth of a unifying spirit was confronted in the first place with the traditional distinctions in the social and cultural organisation of the Gëgs and Tosks. In addition, there were faith differences and the presence of a large Muslim community, which accounted for 70 per cent of the total population. In fact, this was not a typical religious division, for the Muslim community did not lose its feeling for regional (North and South) or clan and ethnic affiliation. The Muslim Albanian community, however, had the sense of affiliation to the ruling and propertied elite of a falling apart, but nevertheless glamorous and long-lived empire. Because of their strong presence in the military structures they felt committed to the Ottoman elite, or as an integral part of the official authority. Albanian Muslims held high positions in the Ottoman army, in the central and local administrations, even as high-ranking officers at the Ottoman court. In spite of their clear awareness of Albanians, of northerners or southerners, of members of a particular clan, the Albanian elite committed to the Ottoman power thought and behaved up to the large scale of the empire. They cared keenly about the self-government of the Albanian families and village communities, but underestimated Albania as a country, as well as the prospects for an independent statehood and the idea of national unity and emancipation. Albanian Muslim elite were educated in the Turkish language and felt associated with the Ottoman-Turkish statehood and culture.

The agitation and the ethnocultural mobilisation which kept all the other Balkan nations active and vital from the beginning of the 18th century onward, the striving for reestablishing their statehood, for an independent church and distinct cultural and educational identity, stayed immature or fragmentary among Albanians. This naturally made them an object of claims on the part of their neighbouring young nations - 20 per cent of the Albanian population were Orthodox and some of them studied at Greek schools, which they left well educated in the spirit of pan-Hellenism. Teaching in the Catholic schools was in Italian and Latin and their pupils were instructed into loyalty to the Papacy and to an Italian or generally pro-Western identity.

The question of the education of the Albanians in their own language was a problem posed many times in the reports of American religious missionaries in the Balkans. In June 1896 Reverend Lewis Bond reported that lessons at the Korça (Korcë) school were conducted in modern Greek, while the local people loved their own tongue which they spoke only at their homes. "Can we do anything for them", asked Reverend Bond. His question obviously remained rhetorical, because three years later he sent another, much more extensive, statement on the issues of the language and education of the Albanians in Korça. He wrote that only at the girls' school, set up by the Protestant community, the training was in Albanian and once more claimed there was no

American who would not sympathise with the Albanians and their desire to use their own language.⁷⁸

It is assumed that the beginning of the Albanian Revival was set by Naum Veqilharxhi's activity and his address to the Orthodox Albanians, which, along with his primer published in 1845, was the first programme document of the Albanian national movement. In it Veqilharxhi demanded Albanian schools and development of the Albanian language as a first step to the evolution of the Albanian people side by side with the other Balkan nations.⁷⁹

The Albanian resistance and national unification movement was directed almost entirely from abroad, mainly by the Albanian Diaspora in Italy, Greece, and Egypt. Of course, each of these Enlightenment groups strengthened the influence of either the Catholic or the Orthodox propaganda. Already in the 1880s, the Diaspora in Bulgaria drew in Albanian patriots who worked for and dreamt of an independent Albanian state, education and culture. Civil and publishing activities carried out by Yusuf Ali bey - the first Albanian political figure that raised the clarion call for independent Albania living in peace and understanding with its neighbours. Exactly twenty years before Sami Frashëri clearly and categorically recognised independence as Albania's only way out of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, Yusuf Ali bey developed the thesis that only an independent Albanian principality would keep the territorial integrity of Albania.⁸⁰

On 10 June 1878, the Albanian League of Prizren was founded, on the analogy of the one-time League of Lezhë formed by Skanderbeg. It was the first to unite under its slogans various Albanian committees, regardless of faith and with a common aim - national unification and emancipation, its priority, however, being the defence of the Albanians' national rights from the aspirations of the neighbouring states. This was prompted by the inclusion of territories with Albanian population within the boundaries of Montenegro under the treaties of San Stefano and Berlin.

Initially, the Sublime Porte was supportive of the Albanian movement trying to communicate an anti-Slav and anti-Russian leaning to it. The support offered by the Austro-Hungarian propaganda, as well as by the pan-Hellenistic circles in Greece, was of the same trend.⁸¹ At the time of the foundation of the League itself, the Ottoman-Muslim trend was prevalent in Prizren. The leadership of the League was in the hands of big landowners and Ottoman dignitaries. The League drew in also members of the Muslim population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A military organisation, an Albanian army, was set up in order to counteract the claims by the neighbouring countries, at that time chiefly by Montenegro.⁸² The Sublime Porte, which officially declared that it would strictly abide by the clauses of the Treaty of Berlin (13 June 1878), in fact relied on the Albanian voluntary militias to resist the Austro-Hungarian claims to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The handful of Albanian patriots with incipient ideas of Albanian independence were frustrated and their hopes withered after a sharp statement by the chairman of the Berlin Congress, German Chancellor Bismarck, who declared that no Albanian nation existed at all and it was not possible to listen to any Albanian claims whatsoever.⁸³

At the outset of the 20th century a discussion began among the Albanian emigration on the need for the Albanians to mature in order to become a nation. In an article under the telling title of *We are Dying Out*, M. Frashëri reveals the disastrous consequences of alienation, hatred, religious division and disunion among the Albanians. Cultural backwardness, the lack of Albanian schools, and the studying of foreign languages at foreign schools, which "poison the minds of youth", were defined as the basic reasons for the Albanians' underdevelopment. M. Frashëri made a lot of attempts to define the concept of nation. Thus, for example, he wrote: "A nation, to claim to be living, should be united, should have its own language, should be civilised, because as it is - wild, with no civilisation and knowledge, it would not last long. In order to live, we have to get civilised."⁸⁴

M. Frashëri's idea was that if Albanians stayed what they were, uncivilised and underdeveloped, if they did not develop into a nation, if they did not cultivate in themselves an aspiration to their own statehood, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire they would perish, and nowhere else is this

idea advanced so clearly as in his periodical *Kalendari Kombiar* (The National Calendar) published in 1900.⁸⁵

Sami Frashëri's message declared in his book *Albania - What it was, what it is, and what will become of it*, published in 1899, became the manifesto of the Albanian revival (*rilindja*). Frashëri drew the prospects for a free and independent republic of Albania, composed of fifteen *sancaks* (Shkodra, Ipek (Pec), Prizren, Prishtina, Skopje, Bitola, Debar, Elbasan, Tirana, Berat, Korça, Kostur, Yanina, Argyrocastro, Preveza). In the name of this idea Frashëri appealed to the Albanians to unite, to work, and to fight against anything that would prevent its implementation. In this way, beginning with a demand for autonomy and struggle for their own alphabet and education, the Albanian national liberation movement arrived at the claim for independence, within broadest ethnic boundaries at that.⁸⁶

As a matter of fact, the personal and family background of Sami Frashëri himself was a salient embodiment of the drama of the Albanian identity. He was brought up in a Muslim environment, was a member of a rich (*bey's*) Muslim family, had a place in the Ottoman literature as a talented author under the name of Shemsüddin Sami and contributed much to the Turkish language reforms. He and his family went through a painful metamorphosis from disappointment and giving up their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and the sultan to full devotion to the idea of developing the Albanian national identity.⁸⁷

In the first decade of the 20th century there was a sequence of spontaneous and unorganised revolts and uprisings in reaction to the attempts by the Ottoman administration to increase the tithe, to levy new taxes on the population - a resistance which involved Albanians from different regions (Gjirokastër, Lushnja, Kruja, Elbasan, etc.) and different faiths, but was of a social nature alone and lacked a well-rationalised national cause.

A serious impetus to some degree of ideological rationalisation and maturity of the national idea was given by the involvement of the Albanians in the Young Turks' revolution of 1908. Very soon, however, it became clear that the Young Turks' revolution contributed in no way to the national causes of the non-Turk peoples, on the contrary, it implied "Ottomanisation" of the empire.⁸⁸ With the consolidation of their power, the Young Turks developed their pan-Ottoman programme: control over the religious communities and the national schools of the non-Turkish peoples, settlement of Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Macedonia and the Edirne area of Thrace by, driving away non-Turkish population from the estates owned by the Ottoman *pashas* and *beys*, confiscation of the arms of the national organisations, etc.

In response, the Albanians formed their constitutional clubs (after the proclamation of the constitution by Abdul Hamid II in July 1908), which took the lead in the movements for opening Albanian schools, in defence of the Albanian alphabet from encroachments by the Young Turks' regime. A cardinal question discussed at the clubs was: how to achieve Albania's autonomy. Two trends took shape within the autonomist tendency: the Albanian feudal lords committed to the Ottoman Empire sought to impose a line of compromise and conciliation with the Porte, while the democratic trend called for struggle for autonomy as a way to achieve full independence. Actually, in that period, around 1910-1911, in the context of a sequence of rebellions, it became unmistakably clear that Albanians had matured for the foundation of their own state.⁸⁹

Parallel with armed insurrectionary action, Albanians defended their cause by parliamentary means. In December 1911, a group of Albanian members of the Ottoman parliament, guided by Ismail Qemal, started a parliamentary debate in order to make Constantinople grant the Albanians national rights in the cultural and administrative spheres. The aim of these claims raised by the deputies was, through acquiring cultural and administrative autonomy, to achieve a clear delineation of the ethnic and political boundaries of Albania. At a parliamentary session in January 1912, taking the floor during the parliamentary debate, Albanian deputy Hasan Prishtina warned that the reactionary policy of the Young Turks' government was going to lead to a revolution in Albania. In the spring of the same year an uprising stirred up the whole of Kosovo, and in June - southern, central and northern Albania. Albanian officers and soldiers began deserting all branches of the of the Ottoman military service to join the insurgents. Towards the

middle of June all of Albania was already at war and the Turkish government administration had actually ceased functioning.

The Albanian leaders and the Sublime Porte took the course of mutual concessions because of the pending war in the Balkans. By means of concessions, the ruling circles in Istanbul were trying to win over the Albanians to take their side in the looming war. On their part, Albanians feared a partitioning of the territories populated by Albanians among the countries of the Balkan Alliance. The Albanian national leaders believed it was better for Albania to remain within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire faced with the prospects of its division among Serbia, Greece and Montenegro. Thus, immediately before the outbreak of World War I, with the assistance of the Sublime Porte, steps were made in the Albanian territories to institute autonomy within the framework of the empire.⁹⁰

With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1912 there emerged an immediate danger of Albania's being partitioned among Serbia, Greece and Montenegro. This was in conflict with the interests of Austria-Hungary and Italy, which had their own plans and supported the establishment of an independent state. The diplomacy of Vienna and Rome, as well as London, gave a signal to Ismail Qemal that the outright proclamation of the Albanian independence would not encounter resistance. At the same time, there were feverish preparations in Albania of calling together an all-Albanian congress. On 28 November 1912, delegates from all over the country gathered in Vlora and officially proclaimed Albania's independence. Albania was not recognised in its ethnic boundaries, but as dictated by the international political conjuncture: Kosovo and Metohija were left outside the borders of the Albanian state, but Serbia's claims to Northern Albania, and Montenegro's to Shkodra, were rejected, Korça and Gjirokastër were given to Albania, while the region of Çameria was annexed to Greece. In July 1913, the Great Powers signed in London the Organic Statute of Albania which made its independence nominal. Albania acquired the status of an independent neutral state under the patronage of the Great Powers, and a commission of representatives of these powers, including an Albanian too, assumed control over the civil and financial administration.⁹¹ Dutch officers took charge of the Albanian gendarmerie, and the German prince Wilhelm de Wied was appointed prince of Albania by the Great Powers and was enthroned in the spring of 1914. Established was also the capital of the new principality - Durrës; thus the too familiar status witnessed in the Kosovo of today took its final shape - from a province of the Ottoman Empire Albania turned into a protectorate of Great Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, and Russia.

During that period the traditional, as well as some new, internal Albanian contradictions emerged again. On the one hand, pro-Ottoman big feudal lords like Esad Pasa Toptani, and Turhan Pasa Përmeti joined the government and practically held the whole country in their hands. At the same time, under the cover of defending Islam and the social interests of the Albanian petty owners, a kind of primitive Bolshevik ideas thrived in Albania, declaring a "holy war" on both Prince Wied and the big feudal lords in the government, enthraling the masses, and gaining control over all of Albania. This regime, which lasted for several months, was named after its leader - Haxhi Qamil, and compelled Esad Pasa to sign a contract with the Serbs and, in practice, betray the national Albanian interests

The two world wars, the occupation periods and the frustration of the Albanian national strivings and anticipations for independence.

With the start of World War I, emerged the contradictions between the nation's discrepant internal interests, which had taken shape depending rather on the sympathy and support for various external factors than on proper Albanian interests and unification prospects. Central Albania was stirred by mutinies against Prince Wied and his government consisting of big lords; Southern

Albania, with Gjirokastër as its centre, was entirely under Greek influence and the illegitimate government of Northern Epirus established its power there. From the north and the east the territories were threatened by Serbian and Montenegrin occupation. In late October, Italy occupied Vlora and annexed it, together with the island of Saseno. Serbia and Greece were given the opportunity to annex the northern and southern parts in 1915. In early 1916, Albania was occupied by Austro-Hungarian, Italian, and French troops and this lasted till the end of the war. Immediately after World War I, the Entente member countries proceeded to settling the outstanding questions through signing a series of peace treaties with the defeated states. The larger part of these arrangements concerned the Balkans and drew up a new geopolitical map, which charged the region with fresh tensions, mutual claims, suppressed revenge-seeking and latent irredentism.

Albania came out of World War I as an independent Balkan state with a surface of 27 thousand square kilometres and a population of 800,000. Its problem, however, remained the practical assertion and defence of the independence and sovereignty, for under the Secret Treaty of 1915 signed in London Italy was promised to receive Albanian territories, there were also many other external claims and internal splits in the identity and orientation of the Albanian society.

The period between the two wars was maybe the only one ephemeral time of endeavours by the Albanians to build up an independent state and lay the foundations of their nation-integrative philosophy and practice. In December 1920, Albania was admitted to UN membership, which was in fact international recognition of the Albanian independence.

The model of state organisation was quite naturally borrowed almost entirely from Turkey, since the century-long enjoyment of a more autonomous status (as compared to the other Balkan provinces) within the framework of the Ottoman Empire made it possible for Albania to assimilate the administrative system and have available a certain number of trained Albanians. A new electoral system, which was a copy of the Turkish one, was introduced. The administrative division, too, followed more or less the Ottoman practice. According to the observers and diplomats of the 1920s, the Albanian governors of counties and districts, the *müdiürs* and the police officers were comparatively well trained, because they were the old and experienced former administrators of the Ottoman Empire. It is a curious fact that the reports from this period described the Albanian judicial system as effective and were impressed by the fact that it functioned irrespective of the huge influence of traditional law.⁹² The truth, however, is that both the administrative officers and the Albanian judges most often came from authoritative *bajraktar* (standard bearer) families who, by tradition, had taken care of order, government, and law enforcement for generations. In a word, as in the period of the Empire, the more or less normal functioning of the state was due to a visible or invisible symbiosis between traditional ways and modern constitutional state government.

This achievement, was not a minor one, of course, but it was far from being a victory for the Albanian national movement. The unification of the entire Albanian ethnos in a single state had not been achieved, and it did not look like as if something would happen before long. After 1925 the government of Ahmed Zogu adopted a course of maintaining alliance with Italy which, in the long run, led to the liquidation of the Albanian independence in 1939.⁹³

Soon after the occupation of Albania in the spring of 1939, its territories were annexed to the lands under the Italian crown, and Victor Emmanuel III became also the king of Albania. All international functions of the Albanian state were assumed by Mussolini's government, and Albania's administration was moved to Rome. This did not alleviate the occupation regime at all and a 100,000-strong army was deployed in this country, while the actual governor of Albania was the royal deputy Francesco Jakomini. The population was given a thirty-day term to surrender all arms, a fact which betrays some naiveté on the part of the occupation authorities, for traditionally Albanians would not give up their weapon.

Today Albanians do not hold a bad memory of the Italian occupation, since for about four years more than 350 Italian enterprises were opened in this economically underdeveloped country, roads were built and administrative buildings were erected. That was also the short period of time

when the debacle of Yugoslavia and Greece led to a redrawing of the Balkan frontiers, and the Albanians came closer to the ideal of national union and the dreams of Great Albania - Western Macedonia and the larger part of Kosovo were annexed to Albania.⁹⁴ P. Chaulev characterises the Albanian attitude to Italy in the following way: "In Albania there are Serbophobes, there are Hellenophobes, but there are no Italophobes. Albanians know the Italian people better than Italians know Albanians. They know that the Italian people, in spite of the new doctrine, cannot become imperialist and, therefore, no matter what the foreign policy of Italy to Albania may be, it does not scare them. Still, Albanians fear the Italian peaceful invasion".⁹⁵

A key point in the Albanian resistance to the occupation, which had long-lasting historical consequences, was the formation of the Communist Party in November 1941. ACP put effort to take the lead of the independently acting detachments, a joint platform was worked out and the National Liberation Front was founded. Among the members of the general National Council was Enver Hoxha. Indeed, the fact that the Communist Party was established by people who came predominantly from the Albanian South, that is were of Tosk origin, as well as that Enver Hoxha himself was born in Gjirokastër, was not of least importance for the Albanian traditions.

On the other hand, at the end of 1942 all Albanians who did not trust the ACP and called themselves "nationalists", founded another resistance organisation named Balli Kombëtar (National Front), at the head of which stood Midhad Frashëri, minister in the first Albanian government of Ismail Qemal and son of Abdyl Frashëri.

The main dividing line between the two resistance formations was the idea of "ethnic Albania" which was on the agenda of the Ballists - free and democratic, modernly constituted ethnic Albania... This was a Maximalist claim in the complex situation witnessed at that time and in the Balkans as a whole. On the other hand, Albanian Communists acted in close cooperation with the Yugoslavian resistance and, under the influence of the YCP, preferred to discuss the issue when the war would already be over. Ultimately, ACP's aspiration to gain an independent control on power took the upper hand and the most convenient moment for joint action of the resistance was missed, namely the time of the capitulation of Italy and the Wehrmacht's decision to occupy Albania.⁹⁶

The deployment of the German army brought to light once again the Albano-Italian sympathies. To this day historians and anthropologists who collect the oral history of the Albanians from the periods of the occupation, are surprised to hear that most of the families remember that they hid Italian soldiers and officers persecuted by the Wehrmacht. Some circles of the Albanian society supported the Germans and collaborated with them. A transitional Executive Committee was formed, then a National Assembly was called together, its membership collaborating with the Germans, and in November a government was appointed, all these bodies being an appendage to the German general administrator Neubacher. In this period the Ballists joined forces with the monarchist Zogist organisation Legalitet and sought partnership with ACP. In a special directive Enver Hoxha not only rejected collaboration, but also ordered the persecution of the Ballists, and later of the members of Legalitet party. In practice, this directive set the beginning of a real civil war in Albania the methods of which were terrorism, mass killings and revival of the traditional regional, clan and religious-cultural division of the country by new - political - means.

Anti-fascist resistance in Kosovo was put under full control by the YCP and Tito. The Albanian population joined Tito's forces, gave a heavy toll of hundreds of lives, but, at the same time, was indignant at ACP's position - in the name of Moscow-dictated internationalism it refused to discuss the strategic issues of the national problem of Albanians. In the second half of 1943, an Albanian League was again set up in Prizren proclaiming its intention to fight for the unification of all territories populated by Albanians. Moreover, the leaders of the Albanian League posed the question of putting Kosovo on equal administrative standing with the other provinces in Yugoslavia. Their endeavours encountered a redoubled opposition, because their right to self-determination was rejected not only by the YCP, but also by the Albanian Communists, and this predetermined the future of hundreds of thousands of Albanians living within the borders of post-war Yugoslavia.⁹⁷

The survival of the Albanian identities under Enver Hoxha. The role of the isolationist policy of the regime in Tirana

Enver Hoxha stepped in Tirana in November 1944 at the head of a Communist government, and on 2 December 1945 his Democratic People's Front of Albania was given a mandate to introduce a republican form of state power. The republic was proclaimed on 11 January 1946.

In the period of 1946-1948 the Soviet economic, political and ideological model was established in Albania. The Communist Party was renamed Albanian Labour Party; it backed in full the resolution of Cominform and in practice laid the foundations not only of a one-party regime in Albania, but also of the one-man dictatorship of Enver Hoxha.

Passed was in 1967 the Decree on the Atheist State, which prohibited the three traditional religions rites in this country, the temples were demolished or profaned by being converted into storehouses, shopping places, sporting arenas, or for some other lay usage. Fear of persecution on account of observance of religious traditions was so strong that in only two or three generations people's real memory of their traditions, of the names of the closed temples, of the meaning and philosophy of faith, was lost. In 1976 the ban on religion became an integral part of the Constitution of Albania and it definitely doomed any effort to keep, even secretly, the religious customs, morality and rites.

Even Bektashism, which has enjoyed a special place in the value system of Albanians, the southerners' in particular, and has been described as the "fourth religion in Albania", has become void of meaning. Today, at the end of the 20th century, a large part of the people in Southern Albania affirm they are descended from Bektashi families, but no one is capable of explaining what Bektashism is like, what its philosophical system, moral values and rituality are.

In order to achieve full control over the whole population of Albania, which had proved throughout its history to be disobedient and unsubmitive to administrative systems imposed by force, Enver Hoxha and his cronies in power took advantage of their knowledge as people that came from and belonged to the Albanian ethnos. The Albanians could be put under control only in the way described by George Orwell - through erasing their collective memory and traditions, as well as by directing the whole physical and intellectual power of society and the individual to pointless efforts (like the construction of hundreds of thousands of pillboxes and their maintenance) until morality and common sense were deformed and destroyed.

Although as a southerner Enver Hoxha tolerated in the government and at key posts Tosks from the South, he tried to eliminate the differences and unify the people from the North and the South through their complete subjugation to the Communist ideological stereotypes and clichés.⁹⁸ This was achieved through the final standardisation of the language, through the schools and the overall educational system, through the military-like regime within the industrial labour collectives, generally through a drastic change in the overall social and value structure of society.

Then came a schizophrenic split of personality and perceptions, familiar to the other Communist regimes too. On the one hand, it was evident that the country was being modernised, illiteracy was overcome, the number of university graduates was rising, but, on the other hand, this led to a propaganda-narrowed perspective, to the unification of minds, to stagnation and fear at all levels of political and social relations, to isolation from the world and encapsulation of the individual and the family, to an effort to survive in the privacy of self-isolation.

The chiefs of the clans and the *bajraktars* were ruthlessly eliminated - killed or put to prison, and precisely they were the guardians of traditions and morals and the ones that were supposed to keep the customs and collective memory for the generations.⁹⁹ It is small wonder then that after the fall of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the establishment of new democratic institutions has been most retarded and most difficult in Albania. In each of the post-Communist countries, societies turned back to their own heritage and restored the democratic traditions and institutions, but the latter had either not been established in Albania, because of the short historical spans of independent existence, or if any positive heritage of self-government and collective decision-making had been present in the national traditions, it had faded away or had

even been eradicated from the collective memory. In such a complex situation the Albanians put efforts to revive their national, ethnocultural, and religious identity, with the invariably concomitant danger to allow, as a result of oblivion, deformation for some ad hoc geopolitical or home policy reasons.

The international isolation in which Albania had been driven into by the dictator over the years - until his death in 1985: the break with Yugoslavia, later with the Soviet Union, with the other countries of the socialist camp, breaking with China too, led to the further loss of true awareness of their own identity. The Albanians have a numerous Diaspora in the neighbouring countries and around the world, where the memory of traditions and cultural-historical identity had been perhaps preserved better, but since they could not travel, they lived in almost full deficit of information about themselves and the world. Every attempt to obtain exterior information - listening to foreign radio stations or studying foreign languages outside the officially sanctioned places - resulted in accusations of espionage and imitation of foreign models.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the aspiration to put the Albanians in isolation developed into forms unheard of, when foreigners in mixed marriages were offered the alternative of either leaving the country, abandoning spouse and children, or staying, but cutting any contacts with their native country.¹⁰⁰ On this subject, scholars collecting oral accounts can put down striking dramas of mothers who stayed with their children doomed to persecution and suspicions in a paranoiac country, while their relatives outside Albania had not known for over 20 years whether they were alive or not. Of course, also accounts of reverse cases, when they left the tyrannical regime in Albania, abandoning their families too, and only after 20 or 30 years fathers met for the first time their sons and grandsons.¹⁰¹ The proportions of the evil deeds committed by a hypertrophied dictatorship and a maniacal cult of personality are sometimes beyond the grasp of even as prophetic talents as George Orwell's.

Today Albanians are faced with an alternative of infinite complexity. On the one hand, very strong are the feeling of freedom and the desire to revive the old traditions, which have been forcefully uprooted from the public mind. The country is now open and the contacts with the Albanian Diaspora help to restore collective memory. The renewal of the differences and rivalry between the North and the South is felt in the political life, and the blood feud law compels people to emigrate and children to be hidden in basements. It is better for this reversal to the past and revival of the ancient customs to be made by scholars alone, because it is important for historical and cultural identity, but their introduction into the present-day realities would take the Albanian society back to the remote age of pre-modern times. On the other hand, Albanians long for affiliating themselves with the modern European values and fulfilling themselves in a peaceful and democratic social climate, like all other post-Communist societies in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The problem of the maturity and consolidation of the Albanian national identity is yet to happen in the Balkans region. For it is obvious that the nation-formation and ethnocultural processes experienced by some nations in the late 18th and the 19th century, or by others like Macedonians - in the first half of the 20th century, have been taking place for the last ten or twenty years for the Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The fall of the Berlin wall happened to the three ethnic Albanian communities in a most literal way. For several decades they have been forming an entirely mystified, verbal, and fanciful perception of each other. The democratic changes, as well as the dramatic events attending the break-up of the Yugoslavian empire, gave the Albanians an opportunity to meet, and gain an intimate knowledge of one another. In order to understand that, although they have been separated by only a frontier within the narrow Balkan stretch, they have become too different in terms of education, religion, culture and mentality, and maybe only language, ethnic memory, as well as kinship ties are what links them with one another.

Perhaps what we are to see happen in the Balkans in the first decade of the 21st century is nothing but this maturation and consolidation of the Albanian national, cultural and civil identity, as well as the difficult personal, family and social choice between tradition and postmodern European values.