

DAMN THOSE ALBANIANS! THE IMAGE OF AN ALBANIAN – AS A RESULT OF THE MILLET SYSTEM AND ITS REFORMS

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to show how the Ottoman millet system and its reform (Tanzimat) influenced the common image of Albanians among the Balkan nations. The first part of the article describes briefly the millet system and the role of Albanians in the reform of the system and the Ottoman Empire in general. The second part is based on ethnographical fieldwork (2005–2008 and 2015–2016) and presents various elements of the image of an Albanian that are a result of Ottoman rule in the Balkans. In the conclusion, it is underlined that the interpretation of the earlier mentioned elements differs and depends on one's particular nationality and ethnic identity.

KEYWORDS: Albanians, religion, Islam, Balkans, stereotype, Ottoman Empire, identity, millet, Skanderbeg

INTRODUCTION

In the movie, *Before the Rain*, Milcho Manchevski shows the conflict in Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, abbr. FYROM, now North Macedonia) between the Christian Orthodox Slavic Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. The beauty of the Macedonian landscape is heartbreaking in contrast to the violence within its borders. In the Balkans in general most conflicts are not only of ethnonational origin but also religion plays a significant role in them. It is worth noting that in most of the conflicts one of the sides is Muslims of Slavic origin or Albanians. Why is it so? It is the heritage of the Ottoman millet system – something I will attempt to explain further using the example of Albanians and their image among the Balkan nations. To illustrate my point I will often use the opinions about Albanians gathered during my ethnographical fieldwork in the border region of Albania and Macedonia in the years 2005–2008. Additional fieldwork was conducted in the years 2015–2016 in Skopje, the capital of FYROM at the time of research, now North Macedonia. In total, almost thirty in-depth interviews were recorded and many more were collected as field notes. The majority of the interlocutors were male Muslims.

MILLET

Millet is a Turkish term of Arabic origin that stands for a confessional community in the Ottoman Empire:

Under the Ottomans (...), the various minorities, or millets, were run by their respective religious leaders, who were held accountable for their coreligionists' behavior (Randal, p. 44).

Specifically, it refers to separate religious communities that were allowed to settle their communal affairs according to their own law or custom (at least as long as no Muslim was involved), primarily through independent religious court systems and schools (Ivanov).

Under this order, minorities enjoyed a wide latitude of religious and cultural freedom, as well as considerable administrative, fiscal, and legal autonomy under their own ecclesiastical and lay leaders (Levy, p. 42).

Ottoman law did not recognize such notions as ethnicity or citizenship therefore people were bound to their millets by their religious affiliations rather than their origins. There was “a Muslim millet, but no Turkish or Arab or Kurdish millets” (Lewis, p. 329). Besides the Muslim millet, the main millets were the Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox. In the Greek Orthodox millet, even though it was named after Greek subjects of the Ottoman Empire, all Orthodox Christians were included, although the religious hierarchy was Greek-dominated. The same happened with the Armenian millet – the Armenian Patriarch was in charge of all non-Orthodox Christians, but in reality, each denomination had its own religious officials.

Although there was no forced Islamization, the various separate regulations for different confessional groups can be called “discrimination” (Shaw, p. 619).

As a rule, Christian peasants paid higher taxes than their Muslim counterparts. This is clearly indicated in Islamic fiscal laws (Vucinich, p. 604).

Also, Shaw notes that

since the military function in Ottoman society was reserved for Muslims, Christians were charged a ‘head tax’ (*cizye*) in its place (p. 620).

Apart from the military, also prestigious positions in state administration were closed for non-Muslim citizens. Therefore, it can be concluded that the change of religion to Islam could have been a way for both social promotion and economic adjustment.

Another major wave of Islamization is connected with the end of Ottoman Empire’s victorious wars and with the threat from European Catholic states and Orthodox Russia. Islamization applied then to Christian people living in areas viewed by the leaders of the Ottoman state as important for military actions. In this period forced Islamization was a common event (Parzymies, p. 27).

As a result of the processes mentioned above, many ethnically Slavic people in the Balkans adopted Islam.

TANZIMAT

Institutionalizing various groupings in millets perhaps did not cause, but surely preserved natural differences between peoples of the Ottoman Empire.

The Millet system therefore produced, simultaneously, religious universalities and local parochialism (Karpát, p. 147).

In effect, most of the societies in the Ottoman Empire were “closed” (Vucinich, p. 597).

The limited communication between constituent parts of the Ottoman Empire was one of the main causes of cultural stagnation (Vucinich, p. 611).

Randal goes even further by saying that

if the millet system allowed Christians and Jews to maintain something of their communal life – and become a major factor in trade, finance, and various crafts – it also ensured that the communities never really mingled. Indeed, they looked upon each other with suspicion and contempt. Under the Ottomans, only the Sunnis displayed any self-confidence and self-respect – they identified with the universal nature and political power of the Sunni Sultan, himself the Caliph, or keeper of the faith. The other communities, deprived of power and responsibility, remained marginal (p. 44).

Reforms were needed to strengthen the integration of all peoples and to increase central authority in the provinces. In the nineteenth century, Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839) developed the idea of Ottomanism (tur. *Osmanlılık*) which became the official government policy of the Tanzimat period (1839–1876).

As a political ideology Ottomanism came to mean that all subjects of the Empire, regardless to origin and religion, were Ottomans (*Osmanlılar*) united in their equality before the law and by their common citizenship. This state ideology reflected the government's attempt to inculcate in every subject Ottoman patriotism directed toward the Empire and its ruling dynasty (Gawrych, p. 522).

Gawrych describes this attempt of creating a new order as a shift representing

a natural extension from religious to cultural tolerance as a doctrine, given the government's drive to integrate politically all subjects under the principle of Ottomanism (p. 523).

One of the first scholars that promoted Ottomanism was Ahmed Cevded Pasha – a Turkish historian and Islamic jurist.

For him, the 'Ottoman nation' (*Osmanlı milleti*) was great society because its people spoke many languages and because it selected the best talents, customs, and manners from among its 'various nations' (*millet-i mütenevvia*) (Gawrych, p. 523).

In his works, he ascribed a very positive and creative role to Christians and Jews in developing Ottoman culture.

Exactly twenty years after the publication of the first volume of Ahmed Cevded Pasha's history, Şemseddin Sami Bey (alias Sami Frashëri) wrote his famous play – *Besâ yâhut Âhde Vefâ* ("Besa or the Given Word of Trust/ Pledge of Honour or Loyalty to an Oath"). Besa, mentioned in the title, is a characteristic feature of Albanian culture. Gawrych describes it as "a solemn agreement tied closely to a strong sense of honor and faithfulness" (p. 525). Neofotistos translates it as "credibility/trustworthiness" and "the means to achieve it are loyalty, respect, understanding, and communication with others" (p. 58). Şemseddin Sami's aim was to present those qualities of Albanians that could contribute to the regeneration of Ottoman society and culture. He

avoided polemical zeal with frequent references to Albanian and their cultural separateness. Rather, the author took special care to develop Ottoman patriotic sentiments through the glorification of the Ottoman homeland and through the ennoblement of the policies of Padişah and the Tanzimat statesmen. Many Ottomans could identify with both themes of Ottoman patriotism and local national sentiment (Gawrych, p. 527–528).

Several other works about the Albanian role in Ottoman culture and history were published. For example, *Musavver Arnavud* (“Depiction of the Albanian”) – a book edited by Derviş Hima contained a number of articles on important Albanian figures from the Ottoman past and on important contributions that Albanians have continuously made to the Empire.

The Albanian community has used the opportunity to be part of the governing hierarchy of the Ottoman state, so *sheikhalislams*, eminent commanders, notorious poets and writers, prime ministers, ministers and governors have emerged among Albanians. Even the first dean of the University of Istanbul (*Daru’l-funun*), the erudite Hodja Hasan Tahsin, was an Albanian (Pajaziti, p. 127).

Gawrych is right in writing that

in the nineteenth century, several prominent Ottoman writers used Albanian characters, customs and traditions to develop themes of Ottoman identity, loyalty and nationality (p. 530).

Actually, it can be stated that Albanians and Albanian culture became one of the major symbols of the Empire and its ideology – Ottomanism.

Individuals of Albanian origin have become an inseparable part of Turkish history and culture. Mehmed Akif from Peja, author of *Safahat* and of the Turkish national anthem, or Sami Frasheri (Shemseddin Sami) who in 1898 wrote a number of articles about the reconstruction of Turkish and in 1899 published the first-ever Turkish-Turkish dictionary, the *Kamusu’l-turki* (...) (Pajaziti, p. 127).

Why particularly them? Probably because they absolutely did not fit in the previous millet system. Albanians belonged to various communities: Muslim, Greek Orthodox, and Catholic, and due to that, they were ideal to represent the Ottoman religious plurality and multi-nationalism.

RELIGION

After the release of the Balkan Peninsula from Ottoman rule, a migration of Muslim people began. Firstly, of course, families connected with the administration and army went to Turkey, next rich people, landowners, and in the end also peasants. This migration was massive and sometimes forced. The national struggle of Balkan peoples was bloodily and ruthlessly suppressed by the Ottoman government which explains the impatient desire to get rid of everything that can remind under Ottoman rule (Parzymies, p. 29).

Many of those who had earlier changed their religion to Islam also left. Some in the next generations became Turks and forgot about their Slavic origins. Those who stayed were regarded by their neighbors as enemies – traitors who had previously collaborated with the odious Ottoman Empire. For example, Torbesh – the colloquial Macedonian term for Macedonian Muslims means literally “those who sold themselves for a bag of cheese.” Some other Muslim Slavic communities in the Balkans worth mentioning are Bosniaks or Bulgarian Pomaks.

Albanians, as “a community integrated in the Ottoman Empire” (Shehu, p. 40), who represented the principles of Ottomanism, ended up having a similarly bad reputation – the reputation of traitors and as the “long arm of Turkey” (Pajaziti, p. 127). In large part that was the heritage of the millet system and the fact that Albanians could not be clearly identified with one particular religion – contrary to the majority of other Balkan nations.

- How is it with faith among Albanians?
- Faith... They don't shout 'faith.' They like nationality more – Albanians – without difference which faith. The majority is Muslim, but there also are Catholics. Yes. There are also Christian Orthodox, those Albanians.¹

For their neighbors it is unusual and strange, therefore Albanians are viewed as outsiders and Others.

At least since the time of Turkish rule – when religious divisions were given primary importance in the Ottoman millet system – religion has been a major source of identity in the Balkans. (...) Unlike, for instance, Serbian nationalism, where ethnic and religious identities have merged, Albanian nationalism today lacks any strong religious attachments (Duijzings, p. 60).

SKANDERBERG

On the other hand, Albanians themselves view their bound to Ottoman patriotism as something that halted their political and social development as an independent nation.

By cutting it from Europe in almost every aspect, the Turkish suppression would delay the development of Albanians in all spheres: material, economic, cultural, civil, urban... It would gravely endanger the spiritual and cultural identity of the Albanian people, built on one side on the Roman culture and Christianity (Qosja, p. 177).

According to Adam Balcer that is the main reason why Skanderbeg became the central figure of Albanian national mythology:

The animators of Albanian nationalism valued the Ottoman period negatively as a regress in the history of their own nation. Their main aim was to break all of the ties linking Albanian Muslims with the Ottoman political community and umma. That's why the anti-Turkish rebel Skanderbeg became the most important hero of the Albanian pantheon (Balcer, p. 33).

Skanderbeg was one of the Empire's top officers who fought in several Ottoman campaigns both in Asia Minor and in Europe. At some point, he abandoned Islam and adopted Christianity. He proclaimed himself an avenger of his country and led a quite successful Albanian uprising against Ottoman rule.

Scanderbeg is shown as nation's archhero and as a protector of Europe against Turks (Pajazati, p. 132).

¹ In-depth interview conducted with a young Torbesh man in August 2007 in the village of Melničani, FYROM.

It is worth adding here, that also some Macedonians regard Skanderbeg as their national hero. They claim he was from the area of nowadays North Macedonia and as such he was of Slavic origin, especially since he abjured Islam for Christianity and led Christians to fight against Muslim Turks (see Alagjovzovski, Ragaru). The case of Skanderbeg's ethnic origin is also a factor that strengthens the antagonism toward Albanians. It is an important issue for the already mentioned Torbesh minority (Macedonian Muslims). Their members identify themselves with the Macedonian state and its Orthodox citizens, but at the same time are part of the Muslim community. To differentiate themselves from Muslims of Turkish origin they want to incorporate the anti-Turkish hero Skanderbeg into their national symbolic mythology. One of the representatives of the Torbesh community stated:

– Now he's got a statue in Debar. Skanderbeg. Think that Albanian? Albanian, cause they decided that way – citizenship "Albanian."²

Even some members of the Albanian community recognize Skanderbeg as the main source of the aversion towards their nation in the Balkans. The below example illustrates that in their opinion it's not unwillingness toward all Albanians in general, but toward one particular Albanian – Skanderbeg:

– Here nobody says bad stuff about Albanians.
 – But the Turkish? They talk bad.
 – No, no. They talk about one Albanian.
 – About who?
 – They talk about that one from the statue.
 – Skanderbeg?
 – Yes, cause he was one raised by Turks. From little he was raised. And he closed this place for them, because this place was for five hundred years under Turks.³

ATHEISTS

For the Balkan peoples, the history of Skanderbeg is yet just another proof that Albanians cannot be trusted in the case of religion – they will betray the others in the same way as Skanderbeg betrayed Islam and the Ottoman Empire. Actually, they cannot be trusted at all. Fan Noli wrote about Skanderbeg's father who changed his religion several times (Christian Orthodox, Catholicism, Islam):

It means that he was a true Albanian – he changed his faith depending on political opportunities (Balcer, p. 45).

Albanians, among whom are Catholics, Christian Orthodox, and Muslims, are believed to attain for themselves as a group the sympathy and the support of the hierarchy of all those denominations. For many people it seems that Albanians treat religion in a very

² In-depth interview conducted with a young Torbesh man in August 2007 in the village of Melničani, FYROM.

³ In-depth interview conducted with two young Albanian men in August 2007 in the village of Centar Župa, FYROM.

facile and pragmatic way – they use it and change it to achieve their current goals. Apart from that, they are not regarded as true, devoted believers and many of their neighbors think that actually, they don't respect religion at all.

– They don't believe ever. Never do they believe. They don't go to the mosque. They drink a lot. You know nothing. You cannot go to the mosque when you drink. And they drink some in the mosque and that's bad.⁴

It takes only one step from this position to think about Albanians as a nation of atheists. Nationality and religion, because of the millet system, are strongly connected for almost all Balkan nations. In result Albanians, who despite various religious affiliations form one nation, are viewed as false believers and crypto-atheists. Especially in the light of the actions and declarations of Albanian nationalists.

From the beginning, national ideologists have propagated a kind of 'civil religion' of Albanianism, which was epitomized in Pashko Vasa's famous and influential nationalist poem *O moj Shqypji* (Oh poor Albania): Awaken, Albanians, wake from your slumber. Let us all, as brothers, swear an oath not to mind church or mosque. The faith of Albanians is Albanianism (Duijzings, p. 61).

It has to be also remembered that Enver Hoxha understood literally Pashko Vasa's words and outlawed all religious denotations. In 1967 Albania became officially an atheistic state. This event also contributed to the construction of the Albanian stereotype of an atheist. Quotes below illustrate this view:

– No mosque, neither church (...). Yes, they don't have faith. We are a nation (they shout).⁵
 – There is no faith. But now there is. They made it. Here there is none. It is written only 'Albanian.' Ask him (...) who are you? Albanian. And who are you? Albanian. What faith? There's no faith! Albanian faith! No communists. Some were earlier communists, but now [they all are] one – Albanians.⁶

CONCLUSION

In a region where one's identity depends on his religious affiliation, the label of an "atheist" is a very strong negative feature. If somebody cannot be trusted in the case of his religion, and what follows, his identity, he cannot be trusted at all – he is without honor. It doesn't apply only to Albanians. It is also valid for the earlier mentioned Slavic Muslims and Roma people – who, as Albanians, in spite of belonging to different confessional communities, share a common identity – something that contributes to their negative stereotype.

It is interesting that various Balkan peoples interpret various elements of Albanian history and culture differently, to arrive at similar judgments about them. The Slavic

⁴ In-depth interview conducted with a young Albanian man in August 2007 in the village of Centar Župa, FYROM.

⁵ In-depth interview conducted with a young Torbesh man in August 2007 in the village of Melničani, FYROM.

⁶ In-depth interview conducted with two young Albanian men in August 2007 in the village of Centar Župa, FYROM.

people regard them as enemies, collaborators, and Turkish representatives because of their role in the Tanzimat period. They are jealous because of Skanderbeg – in their opinion, Albanians don't deserve an anti-Turkish, Christian leader of this format, especially since most of them nowadays are Muslims – which is another negative feature of the Albanians for the Christian people in the Balkans. On the other hand, Muslims, because of Skanderbeg's betrayal, see Albanians as trustless traitors, who probably are secret agents of the Papacy. All in all, they are regarded as false and opportunistic atheists by the members of both confessional communities.

Lastly, it can be clearly stated that the millet system and its reforms have played a major role in creating today's rather negative image of Albanians in the Balkans.

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