
“WHEN CHRISTIANS BECAME DERVISHES:” AFFIRMING ALBANIAN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNITY THROUGH DISCOURSE

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the subsequent ravaging of Bosnian society, people have forgotten the other Balkan nationality whose members include both Muslims and Christians, who have a history of Muslim-Christian cooperation, and who have forged an identity wherein Muslim-Christian unity has carried considerable political capital. I refer to the Albanians who have long lived on the western side of the Balkan peninsula, and who trace their descent to the ancient Illyrians.

Until the nineteenth century, Albanians were known chiefly for their military skills; their national hero, Skenderbey,¹ had kept the Ottomans at bay for many years in the mid-fifteenth century. However, nationalistic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the Albanians territorial pressure from their Slavic and Greek neighbors in the Balkans, and social pressure toward assimilation in the diaspora.² Not only their relatively small numbers, but also their religious affiliations to varied forms of Christianity and Islam put Albanians at a disadvantage in countering these nationalisms. (In an Ottoman census in the early twentieth century,³ Albanians in the Balkans were seventy percent Muslim, twenty percent Orthodox Christian, and ten percent Roman Catholic.) This religious divergence was an anomaly in the Balkans where in all other ethnic groups, such as the Orthodox Christian Serbs or the Roman Catholic Croats, religious boundaries reinforced ethnic solidarity.

In this paper I present a narrative by an Albanian Muslim leader of an incident of symbolic import wherein Albanian Muslims and Christians worked together for survival of their common political leaders. The incident took place in southern Albania in 1908, but my focus is not on the

¹ The Albanian national hero, Skenderbey, who was the son of an Albanian feudal lord in Krujë, was taken from Albanian lands and educated and trained in the Ottoman military. He left the Ottoman forces after a battle near Nish in 1443 and returned to Krujë in central Albania where he successfully held off Ottoman forces for twenty-four years until his death in 1468.

² Albanians had emigrated outward from their lands on the western side of the Balkan peninsula, and were known as *Arbreshe* in the southeastern part of the Italian peninsula, as the *Arvaniki* in the central region of present day Greece, and as *Arnavut* in Istanbul and other Ottoman lands.

³ See Peter Bartl's *Die albanischen Muslime 1878-1912, Albanische Forschungen 8* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1968) pp. 38, 50, 68, 70, 76, for breakdown of the 1910 Ottoman census by *sancak* in Albanian regions.

In his intellectual evolution, Iqbal harbored many glaring contradictions and ambivalences. Iqbal the mystic at times turns into Iqbal the existentialist, expounding upon the necessity of individual awareness and responsibility. And Iqbal the existentialist evolves into the philosopher of praxis, preaching the primacy of action over the idea. While they may reflect on Iqbal as an unsystematic thinker, lacking in discipline of mind and clarity of ideas, these contradictions are also indicative of a restless soul that was constantly searching and synthesizing to find new answers to the cosmic and social issues of his time. His contradictions notwithstanding, Iqbal's enduring legacy lies in the saliency of the political and religious issues that he addressed. Although he proved no more successful in resolving some of the vexing dilemmas that faced the Muslim thinkers who preceded or followed him, his populist rendition of Islam as well as his contributions to the classical Persian and Indian tradition of mystic poetry has made him poignant today.

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incident. Rather the focus of analysis is on the interactive context of recitation, half a century later in America in 1953, where the very recounting of the incident served to secure the political survival of the newly arrived Albanian Muslim leader. The recounting of the incident thus constituted an instance of narrative identity building⁴ and affirming of Muslim-Christian relations in an extension of the Albanian diaspora—America—where the power relations between Muslims and Christians were the inverse of the earlier situation in the Balkans.

The mid-twentieth century recounting of the earlier Balkan incident draws rhetorically from the rich tradition of verbal jousting in Ottoman and Middle Eastern societies. It also draws on parables, which, like the animal tales of *Kalilah and Dimnah*,⁵ were meant to inform and instruct those of greater political power, while maintaining appropriate deference in the teller. In this particular case, the Albanian Muslim leader, who secured his political survival through the recounting of the incident and the subsequent intervention of a powerful Christian Albanian leader, would go on to establish an Albanian Muslim center in America. During the time of Communist rule in Albania (1944-1991), this center became the main Albanian Bektashi Muslim center in the world.

Returning to the incident, to better appreciate it and its telling, I first present the historical constraints and obstacles to Albanian Muslim-Christian unity in the Balkans in the early twentieth century, with specific reference to the situation of southern Albanians, among whom the incident played out. I then present the later recounting of the incident, in America, in the form of a close translation of the oral account as it was told to me and others by the Albanian Muslim leader. In analyzing this discourse and its context, I draw parallels and contrasts between the political situations of the earlier incident and of the later frame of recitation. I also relate more recent examples of accounts of Muslim-Christian cooperation in Albania, and suggest that this particular narrative identity building, a sort of “sub-genre of Albanian unity,” continues in the post-Communist era.

⁴ In his reading of an earlier form of this manuscript, John Voll brought out the point that whereas Albania is a territorial concept, the operational context of the Albanians is an identity diaspora, and that the later incident builds identity on narrative rather than kin. I am most grateful for his comments and insights. I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing support of my work by Balkan historian John Fine.

⁵ The Arabic *Kalilah and Dimnah* (750 A.D.) are a version of a collection of Indian fables that are allegorical animal stories, told as a wise man's advice to an Indian prince.

My sources are studies of Albania⁶ and Albanians,⁷ studies of religion in the Balkans,⁸ theoretical and methodological studies of linguistic anthropology,⁹ my own long-term and ongoing research with the Albanian Bektashi community in Michigan,¹⁰ and my research in Albania itself in the spring and summer of 1993.¹¹

Obstacles to Unity among Albanian Muslims and Christians in the Balkans

In the late Ottoman Empire, Albanian Muslims and Albanian Christians were divided in two millets (Muslim, Christian), three religions (Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism), and four *vilayets* or provinces (Janina, Shkoder, Uskup, Monāstir). They were further divided by policies of the Ottoman Sultan, the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, and the Young Turks, all of whom actively discouraged cooperation among

⁶ The finest historical studies of the Albanian nationalist movement in western European languages are Stavro Skendi's *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878-1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), and Peter Bartl's book cited above. There are as well numerous studies on detailed aspects of Albania's history, published by the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina, in former Yugoslavia, and the Institute of Language and History of Tirana. However, Communist biases figure prominently, particularly in those from Tirana. For recent history of Albania, see Elez Biberaj's *Albania: A Socialist Maverick* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), Arshi Pipa's *Albanian Stalinism: Ideo-Political Aspects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), and Peter Prifti's *Socialist Albania since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978).

⁷ An unusually well-written immigrant study is the Federal Writers' Project (WPA) study of immigrant Albanians, *The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and New*, originally published in Boston in 1939.

⁸ Relevant studies of religion in the Balkans include Frederick and Margaret Haslucks' *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* vol II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929); Stavro Skendi's "Religion in Albania during Ottoman Rule," in *Sudost-Forschungen*, XV, 1956, pp. 311-27; Alexandre Popović's *L'Islam balkanique: Les Musulmans du sud-est européen dans la période post-ottomane* (Berlin: Otto Harrasowitz, 1986); and my own study, "The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania," *The East European Quarterly*, January, 1995, pp. 533-49.

⁹ Linguistic anthropology as a field in America has grown well beyond the earlier structuralist studies of native American languages and the collecting of tales, toward analyses of the social and cultural contexts of verbal performance and interaction. Dell Hymes is a key figure in this growth in his conceptualizing of the ethnography of communication. See "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life" in Gumperz and Hymes' *Directions in Sociolinguistics and the Ethnography of Communication* (New York: Hold, Rinehart & Winston, 1972) and Hymes' *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Richard Bauman's *Verbal Art as Performance*, Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1977, is also important in the changing orientation of this field. And Charles Briggs' *Learning How to Ask: a Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) is theoretically and methodologically illuminating for this approach.

¹⁰ See my book, *Spiritual Discourse: Learning with an Islamic Master* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993), which is based on fifteen years study with Baba Rexheb of the Albanian Bektashi *Tekke* in Michigan.

¹¹ It is thanks to funding from IREX (International Research and Exchange Board) that I was able to travel to and conduct research in Albania in the spring and summer of 1993.

Albanian Muslims and Christians.¹² In particular, the Sultan saw the Albanian Muslims as loyal Ottoman subjects; his palace guard was made up entirely of Albanians. The Ecumenical Patriarch, as head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, claimed Eastern Orthodox Albanians as essentially Greeks, despite the matter of their home language. (This policy paralleled land claims of Greece to regions with Eastern Orthodox Albanians, Albanian Muslims, and some Greeks in the area known to Greeks as "northern Epirus," to Albanians as "Çameria.") As for the Young Turks, they initially supported Albanian political identity, but rapidly changed to a more centralized Ottoman nationalism that ignored ethnic differences.

Among the Christian and Muslim Albanians themselves, there were differences that were obstacles to political unity. As for the Christians, they were divided both by denomination and geography. Roman Catholic Albanians lived in northern Albanian lands that bordered on Montenegro, while the Eastern Orthodox Albanians lived in southern Albanian lands that bordered on Greece. In central Albanian lands and among the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Albanians to the north and south, lived the majority Muslim Albanians. They too were divided.

The Albanian Muslims in the north, including both those in Kosova, bordering on Serbia, and those in Shkodër, surrounded by Albanian Catholic highlanders, were the most decidedly Sunni of Albanian Muslims. In contrast, in southern Albania, the Bektashis,¹³ an Anatolian Sufi Order, had become widespread among Muslims. The Bektashis were known for their tolerance toward non-Muslims, and their relaxed attitude toward Sunni ritual practice. In their holidays and regard for the family of the Prophet, they were Shi'ite; some Sunnis even considered them heretical.

Both Albanian Christians and Muslims were further divided linguistically¹⁴ and socially. Northern Albanians spoke the Gheg dialect and followed more closely the traditional Albanian law or *Kānūn* of Lek

¹² Sultan Abdulhamid (1876-1909) fostered a policy of *Islâmcilik* that stressed the unity of the Muslim millet under the leadership of the Ottoman dynasty. See George Gawrych's excellent unpublished dissertation, *Ottoman Administration and the Albanians 1908-1913*, University of Michigan, 1980, p. 41. The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople fostered division of Albanian Muslims and Christians through its educational policy of only allowing Albanian Orthodox students to attend Greek schools and threatening excommunication for those attending Albanian language schools. See Stravro Skendi's *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878-1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 368. And the Young Turks, despite their initial openness to non-Turks within the Empire, quickly moved toward a policy of centralizing Ottomanization, designed to thwart nationalist movements like that of the Albanians. See Gawrych, above, chapters V and VII.

¹³ The best source on the Bektashi Order is still John Kingsley Birge's *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, published by Hartford Seminary Press, 1937, and republished in London by Luzac in 1965. The research for Birge's book was carried out in Albania and Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁴ Albanian is an Indo-European language with several Balkan areal features and many words drawn from its Turkish, Slavic, Greek, and Italic neighbors. The two main dialects, Gheg and Tosk, are in general mutually intelligible.

Dukagjin,¹⁵ whereas southern Albanians spoke the Tosk dialect, were less isolated than the northerners, and their town and village life was similar to town and village life in many areas of the Balkans.

Yet despite these obstacles and differences, when threatened in the late nineteenth century by territorial claims of Montenegro and Serbia in the north, and Greece in the south, Albanian leaders, both Muslim and Christian, responded with joint action. The external threats, that could as well have divided Albanians even more, became an impetus for cooperation and reliance. As examples of Albanian Muslim-Christian cooperation, historians point to the Albanian League (1878-1881), whereby Albanians first joined to combat proposed ceding of Albanian lands to Slavic neighbors; the Congress of Monastir (1908), through which Albanians gathered to sanction an alphabet for all Albanians, no matter what their faith; and Albania's declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, an empire that was clearly unable to protect Albanian interests. The active leadership of the Albanian League, of the Congress of Monastir, and of the first provisional administration of independent Albania were each made up of Muslim and Christian Albanians.¹⁶

Behind these historic moments, there were ongoing joint activities of Muslims and Christians in Albanian societies, guerrilla bands, and presses that operated in Albanian lands and in the Albanian diaspora, from Bucharest to Boston. And along with the activities of these fledgling organizations, there also occurred incidents of local yet broader symbolic import, of a Muslim *hodja* publicly embracing a Catholic monk for his words on alphabet reform,¹⁷ or a Muslim Bektashi Baba hiding Orthodox Christian

¹⁵ The most accessible translation of the Albanian *Kanun* of Lek Dukagjin is Leonard Fox's. See *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit: The Code of Lekë Dukagjini*, Albanian text collected and arranged by Shtjefën Gjeçov, translated with introduction by Leonard Fox, and published by Gjonlekay Publishing Company, New York, 1989.

¹⁶ For the composition of the Albanian League in its various settings, see Peter Bartl's *Die albanischen Muslime 1878-1912, Albanische Forschungen 8* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1968) pp. 118-20. For the membership of the voting members of the Congress of Monastir, see Ali Vishko's "Kongresi Manastirit," in *Gjurmime albanologjike, Seria e shkencave historike 18-1988*, Pristinë, 1989, pp. 167-9. For the membership of the first provisional administration, see Bartl's book, cited above, p. 184.

¹⁷ See Skendi (1967), p. 371, for reference to this incident at the outset of the Congress of Monastir in 1908. The Congress of Monastir brought Albanians together from the Balkans, other parts of the Ottoman Empire, and the diaspora as far away as Boston to agree upon an alphabet for Albanian. Previously Albanian had been written in the Latin, Greek, and Arabic alphabets, in the different Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Muslim Albanian communities, but by the 20th century the Latin alphabet was favored by most Albanian patriots of all faiths. The purpose of the Congress of Monastir was to decide which of the three main Latin alphabets should be selected as the standard.

patriots from the Ottoman authorities, that made real to the people the transcending of religious differences.¹⁸

Southern Albanians in the early 20th Century: Setting of the Incident

Earlier, in the first part of the nineteenth century, the southern Albanian region had come under the control of Ali Pasha of Tepelen. Even with his demise and execution by the Ottomans in 1822, the economic situation of Christians in that region had not improved, and with the continuing insecurity in the Balkans throughout the nineteenth century, Albanian Orthodox Christians had begun to emigrate south to Egypt, east to Bulgaria, and west to America. In 1884 the first Albanian, an Orthodox Christian from the Korçe region, came to America. In the early 1900s Albanian immigration to New England increased, and Albanian newspapers, like *Kombi* ("The Nation"), founded by Sotir Peçi in 1906, and *Dielli* ("The Sun"), founded by Fan Noli in 1909, were printed in Boston. Most of the Orthodox clergy in America at this time were Greek, and their pro-Greek politics, particularly in regard to Greek land claims to southern Albanian lands, offended the Albanian Orthodox immigrants. Some Albanian Orthodox in America proposed following the path of many Albanians in Italy, known there as *Arbreshe*, who had converted to Uniatism, thereby preserving their Orthodox liturgy, but recognizing the Pope as spiritual head. Other Albanian Orthodox in Egypt had suggested converting to Protestantism, thereby winning acceptance in the West and perhaps new converts from the other three faiths in Albania as well.¹⁹ However, the Albanian Orthodox in America took action, first by separating themselves from the Greek Orthodox Church, and then, in 1908, by declaring themselves an "autocephalous" Orthodox Church with Fan (Theofan) Noli, ordained by a Russian bishop in New York, as their bishop.

Meanwhile, in the Balkans, there was a progressive escalation of action and reaction between nationalist Albanians, both Orthodox Christian and Muslim on the one hand, and the Ottoman and Patriarchal authorities on the other. In 1906 a secret Albanian committee was formed in Monastir that proposed using guerrilla bands against Turkish domination. The following year, in 1907, Çerçis Topulli, a Muslim from Gjirokastër,

¹⁸ For a brief reference to this incident, see Xhevat Kallajxhi's *Bektashizme dhe Teqeja Shqiptare n' Amerike* (New York: Waldon Press, 1964), p. 29. However, I disagree with Kallajxhi's dating of the incident in 1911. From other accounts of the activities of the band of Topulli and Grameno, I would place the event earlier, in 1908. However the activities of the bands did continue through 1912.

¹⁹ See Skendi (1967), p. 179.

and Mihal Grameno, an Orthodox Christian educator and propagandist from the Korçe region, went with a small band from the Albanian coast eastward across the *vilayet* of Janina. Their purpose was to raise national consciousness to which end they distributed books in Albanian and explained their goals.²⁰ By 1908, more guerrilla bands had formed, but that of Topulli and Grameno continued to operate, holding among the other bands a special place of honor. Only the purpose of the band had expanded and they even assassinated the Turkish Commander in Gjirokastër who had been persecuting nationalistic Albanians. The bands were supported by the villagers, and especially by the Muslim Bektashis. As the Christian Grameno wrote in his memoirs, "The doors of Bektashi monasteries were always wide open to Albanian guerrillas."²¹

The Larger Discourse and Setting in Albanian Immigrant America

Several Albanian Orthodox Churches, beginning with that of Fan Noli in Boston in 1908, had been founded in America for the immigrants from southern Albanian lands. Muslims from these same areas had also emigrated, but due to their expectation of return to the Balkans, and later, to a lack of funds during the Depression, they did not establish a mosque until 1949 in Detroit. A Bektashi cleric, Dervish Rexheb, from the southern city of Gjirokastër, had arrived in New York in 1952, but because of the socialist and communist turmoil in the Albanian community in New York (Albania had been taken over by Communists in 1944), the Dervish was unable to found a *tekke* there. Instead he was advised to go to Detroit where the Albanian people were more conservative. This he did, and in 1953, a group of fifteen Albanian men gathered in Detroit and agreed to collect funds to buy land for a Bektashi *tekke*.

From the time of Dervish Rexheb's arrival in America, the Albanian-American newspaper, *Liria* ("Liberty") had criticized him. But as *Liria* was known to be a tool of the Communists at that time, and as the Dervish had been a leader of anti-Communist forces in southern Albania in the early 1940s, the group in Detroit took no notice. Yet when the more respected Albanian-American newspaper, *Dielli* ("The Sun") began to cast aspersions on the newly arrived Dervish, the group in Detroit took it seriously. Half the supporters left, and it began to seem doubtful that a Bektashi *tekke* would be founded after all.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

What to do to recast Dervish Rexheb's reputation and counter the accusations? (The following is a translation from the Turkish²² oral account of the situation and how it was resolved, as told to me by Baba Rexheb, formerly Dervish Rexheb, and tape recorded at the Bektashi *Tekke* in Michigan in February of 1994.)

I [Baba Rexheb] said, "Call him." Fan Noli [much older, but still head of the Albanian Orthodox Church] will come here because every year he comes to visit his churches. [There has long been an Albanian Orthodox Church, St. Thomas, in Detroit.] I will visit him and tell him of the matter. He [as founder and former editor of the newspaper *Dielli*] is the person who can deal with this, only he.

In any case, Fan Noli came [from Boston]. I sought an audience with him [at the Orthodox Church in Detroit]. He responded, "Most welcome."

We went there. "There is this matter . . ." And I recounted, such and such and such. There were also two people that were from our group [of Bektashis] and Fan Noli's [members of the patriotic organization, *Vatra*, that Noli had helped found in 1911]. One was Yaçe Selanica and the other, Muhammed Zagari.

"Excellency," [Noli was an archbishop] I said. "Muhammed Zagari and Yaçe Selanica and others would like me to found a Bektashi *tekke* here. As for myself, I have promised nothing without first talking with you, nothing, without asking you."

He paused, thinking, thinking, thinking. Then he said, "Yes, were it I, as Yaçe and Muhammed are proposing, I too would do as much." That meant he supported us.

But then, most foolishly, someone asked me, in front of Noli, "Dervish, can Christians become initiated Bektashis?" What could I say? I said what came to mind.

I said, "We do not allow Christians to become Bektashis, nor Bektashis to be converted to Christianity. Our purpose is that Christians and Bektashis, together, make a nation [the Albanian one]. Yet, when there was need by the nation, we didn't just allow Christians to be initiated, we even made them dervishes [a higher degree of affiliation, similar to "monk" in Christian Orders]."²³

"How was this?" asked Fan Noli. His Holiness' attention had been snared. I responded:

²² Turkish was the main language of Bektashi poetry and of the Bektashi Order until Albanian started to be used more extensively in Albanian Bektashi *tekkes* in the last century. For years Turkish was also the common language of Baba and myself in my study with him at the Michigan Bektashi center. In the last ten years however I have studied Albanian, and now use both Albanian and Turkish with Baba and the community.

²³ In Bektashi communities, there are three stages of affiliation: lay people drawn to the Baba (*ashiklar*), lay people who have been initiated into the secret rituals (*muhiban*), and the clerics (dervishes and babas).

* * *

After the first meeting [the secret meeting in Monastir in 1906], they [Albanian patriotic leaders] sent an order—no, more like a request, that said we must now bring forth some men who will show the Turks that we want our independence. “Fine [said the Bektashi leader of that time], we will assist them.”

And so some men came together and rose up against the Turks. But there were also other men, bad ones, considered as such, who appeared [who would inform the Ottoman officials]. That night, those who had risen against the Turks met at the *Tekke*²⁴ of Frashër, chosen because it was so hard to get to, inaccessible, automobiles, had there been any, could not have reached it. And while they gathered at the *tekke*, the Turks with three hundred soldiers amassed and surrounded the *tekke*. They would wait until daybreak, and then enter and seek out the men who had gathered and capture them.

When those inside realized the situation, they were saddened. Why? “Not that we must break out—either we escape or we die. Certainly we expected as much. It is our aim. But what we regret, we would prefer that the *tekke* not also be destroyed from our actions.” The men were much agitated from the predicament.

But the Baba, who had been sitting elsewhere, arose and came and looked at the men in their dismay. “What is it, what is wrong?” They said, “Look here, all around us, the Turks have surrounded us.”

“Oh that,” the Baba said. “I’ll take care of that.” And he called a dervish. “Dervish, come here. And bring with you as many *taç’s*²⁵ [the special Bektashi headpiece that dervishes always wear] as there are men.”

The dervish brought the *taç’s* and gave them to the men. Of course they had beards [Bektashi dervishes do not cut their beards] as well because the *komitadjis* were always like that. Thus they became Dervish Çerçis [the famous Muslim leader, Çerçis Topulli], Dervish Mihal [the famous Christian publicist, Mihal Grameno], Dervish So-and-so.

Then the Baba went out to the Turkish Commander. He said, “What do you want here?” “We have heard,” said the Commander, “that there are evil men here. We have come for them.”

²⁴ Bektashi centers are known as *tekke* in Turkish, *teqe* in Albanian. Because celibate Bektashi dervishes and babas live there, they are often roughly translated as “monasteries,” albeit Muslim ones. But in my experience they differ from monasteries in being more community centers as well. A crucial difference is the prominence of lay people who are also initiated members and who participate in the restricted rituals with the clerics. With their locations outside towns in places conducive for meditation, *tekkas* have also offered opportunities for secret political meetings.

²⁵ The term *taç* comes originally from the word for “crown,” and is a white felt headpiece made up of twelve pieces of material, symbolizing the twelve abstentions. In this context it immediately identified its wearer as a Bektashi dervish or *baba*.

"No, we wouldn't keep such men here. Only good men," said the Baba. "As you will," said the Commander, "but our order is to capture them."

"Fine," said the Baba. "Come in." And the soldiers entered and searched for them throughout the *tekke*.

Meanwhile, the Baba called out, "Dervish Çerçis, Dervish Mihal, Dervish So-and-so! Bring coffee."

As for the Turkish Commander, after the fruitless search of his men he said, "I beg your pardon, Baba. They must have misled us. It must have been a false rumor. Forgive us."

"It is no matter," allowed the Baba. "Only know that we keep only good men here, not bad ones, [Turkish: *Zarar yok dedi Baba. Fakat biliniz ki biz iyi adamlar tutarız, değil fenalar*] thus, as I said."

* * *

Then Noli turned to me. "Ahhh, this I didn't know before, these events," he said. "But you should write this out." "Most certainly," I replied, "I will write as I have told you, but I would like—you see I don't know English. Could you, could I give it to you so that you would translate it into English?" "Oh, I'll do it," said Noli.

And thus Fan Noli went back [to Boston] with good feelings. And he went to the office of *Dielli*, to Kerim, its editor. "Now," said Noli, "what are you doing? Why are you against the *tekke*? I spoke with Dervish Rexheb myself. They are good men. As for you, I want you to take back the evil deeds imputed to him by the Communists."

So the editor, Kerim, included in the next edition of *Dielli* a short notice, saying, 'we have heard, according to the Communists, that this dervish was to have done certain things, and certain other things. And yet there is not a single document to attest this. Indeed there was this dervish who was there (in Albania) during the war (World War II), but we are not concerned with this matter further, unless and until there are documents.' Thereby he closed the matter.

With the cessation of criticism in *Dielli*, the men in Detroit went ahead with their plans for a Bektashi *Tekke*. They purchased an eighteen acre farm southwest of Detroit, established the First Albanian-American Bektashi *Tekke* in 1953, and since then have expanded and renovated the *tekke* complex several times.

Analysis of the Discourse and Parallels of the Inner Incident and Outer Frame

After Baba told me the account in Turkish, he turned to a man on his left, a Sunni Muslim Albanian, newly arrived from Macedonia, who had been listening politely throughout, and recounted the incident in Albanian.

There were several details in the Albanian account that had been more general in the Turkish one. For example, in the Albanian account, the Bektashi Baba called for "seven *taç's*," rather than "just as many as there were men." But the main difference between the account told the Albanian and the account told me in Turkish was the lack of any mention of the American immigrant political context in which Baba had recounted the incident. This context had made clear how important the telling of the incident was in the history of the Bektashi *Tekke* in America. As such, this context had provided both the connection with more recent times, as well as the "frame" within which the incident was to be interpreted.

In the past, anthropologists, folklorists, and historians sometimes ignored the "performance frame" in which a verbal event was recounted. But scholars like Bauman and Hymes and other linguistic anthropologists began in the 1970s to insist on the crucial value of the context of recitation for interpretation.²⁶ In the situation with Baba, the presence of the larger context in his Turkish telling to me was foregrounded by its very absence in his subsequent retelling in Albanian to the newly arrived Sunni Muslim Albanian. This variation can be related to the purpose for each telling. With the recently arrived Albanian, Baba was thereby including him in the interaction, and so told the incident that emphasized Albanian unity in the Balkans, a value Albanians readily share. In my case, I had offered to write of the incident in English, for while Fan Noli had agreed to do so, he had passed away before he was able to do it. Baba had earlier told me of the incident of "Christians becoming dervishes," but he only included the fuller context of his initial difficulties with the Albanian-American newspaper when I offered to write the incident in English for posterity. In doing so Baba contextualized the discourse in the history of the American Bektashi *Tekke*, and thereby shared the more profound meaning of the discourse incident for the American Bektashi community.

In particular, in the 1950s American context, the discourse had two major messages. The first was to answer the question as to whether Christians could become Bektashis. This question was particularly awkward, given the vulnerability of immigrant religious bodies to loss of membership in America. To suggest that the Bektashi *Tekke* could compete with the Orthodox Church for members was the worst possible way to secure Archbishop Fan Noli's assistance. But once the issue was raised, Baba had to both deny proselytizing, and secure Noli's trust. The second issue that Baba's discourse addressed was whether Baba was the sort of person Fan Noli desired as a colleague. For, with Noli head of Albanian Orthodox Christians, and an Imam Vehbi head of Albanian Sunni Muslims, if a

²⁶ See Hymes (1972), Bauman (1977), and Briggs (1986).

Bektashi *Tekke* were established in America, Baba would be on a similar level with Noli as head of a major Albanian religious establishment.

Baba's earlier deference to Noli had been well received by the Archbishop. Certainly it was appropriate as Noli was unquestionably the senior Albanian religious leader in America. But Baba's very choice of discourse and the way he played with the interaction of the Bektashi Baba and the Turkish Commander showed great sensitivity in the arena of Albanian verbal play that is so essential to success in Albanian politics. Besides denying the desirability of Christian converts and emphasizing the shared loyalty of Bektashis and Christians to Albanian independence, the incident can also be understood as a parable on Baba's situation in America.

Both the incident in southern Albania during late Ottoman times and the situation Baba found himself in immigrant Albanian society in the 1950s presented people in need of assistance, people who would do them harm, and agents who could offer assistance. In the earlier Balkan context, those in need of assistance were the Albanian nationalists, both Christian and Muslim. In Albanian immigrant society in America, the person in need of assistance was Baba, then Dervish Rexheb. Those who would harm the nationalists in the Balkans were the Ottoman military, personified by the Turkish Commander, and assisted by informers, whereas those who would do harm to Baba were the Communists and their defamations of Baba that were being spread through Albanian immigrant newspapers, personified by the editor of *Dielli*, Kerim. In early twentieth century southern Albania, political power was mostly in the hands of Muslims, while in America and in Albanian immigrant society here, political power was in the hands of Christians. The person who acted to save the Albanian nationalists was the Muslim Bektashi Baba. The proposed agent of assistance in Albanian immigrant America was the Christian archbishop, Fan Noli.

Through recounting this particular incident, Baba was in effect saying, 'as the Bektashi Baba did for our fellow nationalists earlier in this century, so you do for me now in America.' That is, 'as Bektashis were agents of survival for your confreres in the past, so you be an agent of my survival in the present.' By drawing the parallel of himself to both Christian and Muslim nationalists, Baba was also reinforcing, through narrative, loyalties that Noli and he shared.

There is an even tighter parallel in that the Turkish commander asserted that he had heard that there were "bad men" who had gathered in the *Tekke*. The Bektashi Baba countered this, and at the end repeated to the Commander, "Know that we only keep good people here." Obviously the Commander and the Bektashi Baba had different ideas of what was judged "good" or "bad;" the Turkish terms are general enough to encom-

pass patriotic loyalty or moral quality. Also in the American immigrant context, the Communists through the newspapers had alleged that Baba was "bad." Baba called this into question, and was clearly asking Noli to help counter this defamation.

As Baba indirectly requested, so Noli effectively responded. Noli stopped the *Dielli* editor from printing more against Baba, occasioning as well a sort of apology that called into question the paper's earlier allegations by stating that there had been no documents.

Accounts of Muslim-Christian Cooperation as a Continuing Genre

The English terminology that comes to mind in describing the above discourse, "story within a story," or "verbal play," is insufficient in that it pulls it out of the political arena. The above discourse was decidedly political and the stakes were high—the whole future of the Bektashi *Tekke* in America depended upon it. Baba had already been unable to found a *tekke* in New York. Beyond Detroit there was no other Albanian Muslim community of sufficient size in America.

When I asked Baba what sort of genre this account was, he responded with the Ottoman term, "*ifade-i meram*," or "exposition of thought or deposition of intention." In historical context, and particularly as told by a Bektashi cleric, the account was a testimonial of Bektashi support for the Albanian nationalist movement. As I elaborated above, it was also a shrewd political move to garner the support of the powerful Albanian Orthodox archbishop. Its discourse form in the larger context, that of parable, is often understood as a way of teaching in which the teacher does not directly command or confront the student, but rather presents a seemingly unrelated situation, from which the student draws conclusions about his or her own situation. I would add that this is also a discourse form used to address those with greater power, for through the indirectness, the appropriate deference can be maintained throughout.

In terms of Muslim-Christian relations among Albanians, I earlier characterized the incidents of Muslim-Christian cooperation against a common enemy, be it the Ottoman regime or the Communist regime, as local incidents of broader symbolic import. These incidents and their tellings are not unique. Older Albanians, whose parents lived during the time of Ottoman rule and who themselves experienced the Communist regime, proudly retell such incidents of local cooperation among Albanian Christians and Muslims.²⁷ And such incidents and retellings continue today. For example, in a recent edition of the Albanian-American paper *Illyria*,

²⁷ In Albania in the spring and summer of 1993, people told me many incidents of cooperation of Muslims and Christians during Communist (1944-1991) times. For example, in the presence

in the context of requesting financial assistance for a new Christian Orthodox newspaper in Albania from Albanians of all faiths, reference was made to an earlier most generous contribution by a Muslim Albanian to the Fan Noli fund.²⁸

Another recent example of Muslim-Christian cooperation occurred when public observance of religion was again made legal in Albania in 1991, after twenty-four years of governmentally prescribed atheism. At this time most mosques, churches, and Bektashi *tekkes* were in ruin and disrepair. To reopen them, major assistance was needed. For example, the Bektashi Headquarters in Tirana had been used as an old people's home. When the government had "returned" it to the Bektashi Order, it allotted the Bektashis only several rooms in the building. Old people were still housed in the other rooms. The Albanian Bektashis wanted to reopen for their annual holiday of *Nevrruz*. What to do?

The last week before the holiday, Mother Teresa, internationally known for her work in Calcutta with the dying, but less well known for her Albanian Catholic ethnicity, found homes for those old people who still remained in the Bektashi Headquarters. To thank her for her assistance, as well as to symbolize the unity of Christians and Muslims in Albania, Mother Teresa was asked to speak first at the public ceremony on the day of the Bektashi holiday.

This incident of the Bektashis and Mother Teresa is thus one more example in which those who were in need of assistance (the Bektashi Muslims) against those who would thwart them (the accumulated destruction of resources and properties of religious institutions by the Communists) turned to a leader of another faith—here the Roman Catholic Mother Teresa. It is through such incidents and their tellings and retellings that unity among Albanians in the Balkans as well as in the diaspora continues to be affirmed.

Indeed, such accounts have become a sort of "sub-genre" of national unity among Albanians. The foremost historian of the Albanian national awakening, Stavro Skendi, noted that the nationalist idea was first brought home to Albanians through the experience and interaction of bands of Albanian patriots who were made up of both Christians and Muslims.²⁹ I would add that it was not just the experience and interaction themselves,

of Communist Party investigations, a Muslim doctor in Tirana told of covering for a Catholic doctor who had been saying her rosary in a room in the hospital. In most of the cases told to me, the various religious affiliations were mentioned, but the commonality of the people was that they had religious belief. This Muslim-Christian cooperation also is evidenced in the current leadership of the Democratic League of Kosova.

²⁸ "Autoqefalia Ortodokse Shqiptare," by Niko Kirka, in *Illyria: The Albanian-American Newspaper* (published in the Bronx, New York), February 28-March 2, 1994, p. 17.

²⁹ See Skendi (1967), p. 214.

but also the telling and retelling of these experiences, like the account of "when Christians became dervishes," that the unity of Albanians spread, and the division between "*giaour* (non-Muslim) and Turk (Muslim)," to use the older common parlance, was reframed in terms of common Albanian identity and common Albanian political aspirations.

In post-Communist times, incidents of cooperation among Muslims and Christians continue to occur, and the accounts of these incidents continue to be told. These serve the purposes of reaffirming a broader Albanian identity within the context of different religions, and of pooling scarce resources for religious institutions. Further, the more recent incidents of Muslim-Christian cooperation and their narration serve to link the current period with the late Ottoman period where, in the context of external political threat, the impulse for unity among Albanian Muslims and Albanian Christians overcame religious division.

Finally, in the recent Balkan context, the cultural genocide of Muslim and Christian Bosnians by ultra-nationalist Serbs and Croats, and the myth of "ancient ethnic hatreds" spread by Western power-brokers and news services, contrast sharply with the narratives and realities of Muslim-Christian cooperation among Bosnians and neighboring Albanians as well.

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FRANCES TRIX

