

# **Religion in post-communist Albania: Muslims, Christians and the idea of 'culture' in Devoll, southern Albania**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the issue of religion in post-communist Albania. It is based on ethnographic material collected in the southeastern district of Devoll in the mid-90s. Through an analysis of the role of religion within local society it attempts to question the common assumption that religion in Albania 'does not matter', without, on the other hand, claiming that there is ground for religious conflict or fundamentalism. In this paper, I analyse the relations between Muslims (who are in majority in this district) and Orthodox Christians by looking at local ideas about 'culture'. This category, which should be understood as 'civilisation' or 'education', appears as a way to classify people and religious communities: Christians are generally granted more 'culture' than Muslims. The aim of this paper is to understand the meaning of such statements about the level of 'culture' of Muslims and Christians and to explain the use of the category of 'culture' in relation to the present state of Muslim/Christian relations.

**KEYWORDS:** Albania, religion, culture

## **Introduction**

Religion is often a sensitive topic in Albania, especially when it comes to the division of society into two or more 'religious communities'. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of Muslim and Christian communities has been seen as a threat to national unity. The antireligious politics followed by socialist Albania after 1944, which culminated in 1967 with the abolishment of religion and the destruction of many cult places, can be seen as a response to this threat. Its failure to erase religious practices and beliefs among the population, together with the 'resurfacing' of religious communities after 1990, have maintained the idea that religion can lead to division. At the same time, the fact that a majority of Albanians are Muslims has been considered to be an obstacle on their road towards Europe and the West (Clayer 2002). This has been especially the case since the turn of this century, when Islam came to be associated with fanaticism and terrorism in the media and public opinion of

most Western countries, while Albanians were, on the contrary, eager to assert their belonging to the Western world after fifty years on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

My hypothesis in this paper is that there is a discrepancy between the representation of religious division as a threat on the one hand, and the reality of religious coexistence on the other. I do not mean however that the actual relations between Muslims and Christians should only be conceived of in terms of tolerance and harmony, as is often argued in answer to the stigma of fanaticism and conflict. Both the fear of religious extremism and the myth of harmony consider Albanian Muslims and Christians as belonging to worldwide religious communities or, in other words, as local representatives of Islam and Christianity. They rely on the idea of global identities of Muslims and Christians or, to put it another way, on the idea that to be Muslim or Christian in Albania is not basically different from being Muslim or Christian anywhere else. I argue that, on the contrary, the actual relations between Muslims and Christians in Albania should be considered as embedded in local configurations and should first be understood in their local contexts. We should first try to understand what it means to be Muslim or Christian in each particular context. We shall then realise not only what is peculiar in the religious situation of Albania, but also how this situation differs from one region to another within the Albanian context.

In a previous paper, I made an attempt to draw a picture of Muslim/Christian relations from the observation of the local forms they take in a district of southeastern Albania known as Devoll. This picture was drawn by taking into account spatial distribution, level of intermarriage, names, and stereotypes, and relations with the state, rather than strictly religious beliefs and practices (de Rapper 2002b). In the present paper, in order to complete the understanding of the coexistence of Muslims and Christians at the local level, i.e. to grasp the meaning, for individuals, of religious belonging and affiliation, I suggest making use of a local category: the idea of ‘culture’ (*kulturë*). The notion of ‘culture’ is locally used to classify individuals and collectives and to rank them on a scale of moral value: some people ‘have culture’ (they are *me kulturë*), others have not (they are *pa kulturë*). ‘Culture’, as it is understood in that particular district – and, as far as I know, in other parts of southern Albania – is not specifically concerned with religion: one can ‘have culture’ whatever one’s religious affiliation or degree of devotion. It is, however, common to hear comments on Muslims or Christians in terms of their level of ‘culture’. And in most cases, interestingly, Christians are granted more ‘culture’ than Muslims.

The aim of this paper is to understand the meaning of such statements about the level of ‘culture’ of Muslims and Christians and to explain the use of the category of ‘culture’ in relation to the present state of Muslim/Christian relations. In the first section, I give an overview of religious coexistence in the Devoll district of southeastern Albania. Section 2 is a presentation of ‘culture’ as a local category. The third section brings together vernacular explanations of the higher level of ‘culture’ granted to the Christian part of the population with historical data concerning the socio-economic position of both communities. In the last part of the paper, I look at the way ‘culture’ is negotiated by Muslims and Christians, a negotiation that is revealing of the positions occupied by each ‘religion’ in various configurations. Ethnographic data were collected in 1995-1996 during a one-year stay in several villages of Devoll.

## Muslims and Christians in Devoll

Devoll is a district (*rrëth*) located in southeastern Albania, on the border with Greece. It consists of forty-four villages distributed around its centre, the small town of Bilisht (around 8000 inhabitants in 1995), which lies on the road leading from the city of Korçë and central Albania to the border post of Kapshticë/Kristalopigi, and from there to Greece. Most of the villages are situated on both sides of a large and relatively flat valley, in the middle of which flows the river Devoll. This part of the valley is locally called Fusha, 'the plain', or Devolli *i poshtëm*, 'Lower-Devoll'. Villages are generally settled at the foot of low hills and mountains, between agricultural lands on one side and pastures and forests on the other, although some of them, said to be ancient *chiftlik* villages, are settled in the midst of the fields. The upper part of the valley, called Mali, 'the mountain', or Devolli *i sipërm*, 'Upper-Devoll', has much less arable land and more pastures and forests, and is occupied by villages generally smaller in size.

All villages (*fshat*) are fixed and compact settlements. They consist of at least two neighbourhoods (*lagje*), usually more, lying on both sides of the main street. Around the inhabited part of the village are gardens and small irrigated fields, where people grow corn, onions, beans, and other vegetables. The more distant fields, which used to be irrigated at the time of the cooperative (before 1991), are in most cases left uncultivated for lack of water and mechanisation.

The population (around 35 000 'Devollis') is mainly Albanian-speaking, with the exception of the village of Vërnik, which is part of the Macedonian minority of Albania. There is no evidence of Greek- or Arumanian-speaking population in most recent history, although some families claim to descend from settlers arrived from parts of Macedonia, which are today in Greece, or from pastoral areas in the Pindus range, across the Greek-Albanian border. Until 1924 and the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey, a few villages on the Greek side of the border had close links with Devoll; they were inhabited by Albanian-speaking Muslims who were forced to move to Turkey. Before that time, they used to intermarry with Devolli, and Bilisht was their market town.

Most of the Devollis are Muslims, a minority being Orthodox Christians. Among Muslims, some present themselves as belonging to heterodox orders, such as the Bektashi and Halveti orders, and they care for several locally known sacred places (for instance Inonisht in the village of Kuç). They however consider themselves to be Muslims and, at the time observations were conducted, did not express any opposition to other Muslims. Most of the people I have met declare a belief in God. Notwithstanding the level of religious practice and feelings (which of course varies from one individual to another), everyone is aware of belonging – at least by family origin – to a particular 'religion' (*fe*), Muslim or Christian. It thus possible to say that in Devoll, as elsewhere in Albania and the Balkans, one belongs to a religious community by attribution rather than by adherence (Hayden 2002: 208). Belonging to a religious community, or 'religion', is not only a matter of faith. The social implications of religious attribution are visible at different levels of social life.

First of all, religious communities appear in the spatial distribution of local settlements: with the exception of the town of Bilisht, Muslims and Christians live in separate villages or, as is the case in the few mixed villages, in separate neighbourhoods of the

same village. Moreover, Christian villages are more often located in the mountains (especially in Upper Devoll) while Muslim villages are located in the plains. Studies by Zivkovic (1997), Bougarel (1998), and Alexiev (2005) have shown what use can be made, in terms of representations and in social relations, of the opposition between highlanders and lowlanders in various Balkan contexts. We shall see in section 3 the role it played in Devoll, in relation to the category of 'culture'.

Social implications of religious affiliation also appear in the level of intermarriage, which can be taken as an indicator of the distance between both communities and which is extremely low. It is acknowledged by all informants that intermarriage was almost non-existent before the Second World War. The genealogies I collected in Muslim villages reveal only exceptional marriages of Muslim men with Christian women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later on, and especially after the ban on religion in the late 1960s, more intermarriage occurred. They were, however, more of an urban phenomenon and remained extremely rare in villages around Bilisht, even in those villages that have a mixed population. In fact, intermarriage rarely occurs within mixed villages. According to the people involved in those cases, such marriages were not easy to undertake and usually meant conflict between the spouses and members of older generations, who were not accustomed to crossing religious boundaries.

Religious division of society is finally visible in the patterns of naming and labelling individuals and collectives. For instance, it is common to hear people talking about members of the other faith as belonging to another 'nation' or 'race' (*komb, fis, racë*)<sup>1</sup>, or stressing the irreducible differences that make them distinct from people from the other 'religion'. Religious communities are thus clearly identified with large descent groups whose members share not only religious ideas and practices, but also, and perhaps most of all, moral characteristics and cultural features which make them distinct from the others. This interpretation of religious identities is confirmed by the fact that the maintenance of the religious boundary between Muslims and Christians seems to rest for a large part on a system of representations and stereotypes which have, generally speaking nothing to do with religion and are concerned with what appear as the basic moral values and their opposites (courage and cowardice, violence and cold-bloodedness, intelligence and stupidity, honesty and wickedness, etc.). Through this system of stereotypes, both Muslims and Christians hold a peculiar position in the ethic values of local society. For instance, Christians claim to be hard-workers who save their money while they criticise Muslims from neighbouring villages for being lazy and for spending lavishly. On the other side, Muslims consider their spending of money to be a mark of generosity and hospitality (turning a negative value into a positive one) and they logically accuse Christians of miserliness. In this case, as in similar ones (de Rapper 2002b), one of the terms is usually valued as 'civilised' (*me kulturë*) and the other as 'uncivilised' (*pa kulturë*). Working hard and saving money is thus considered more civilised than spending one's time and money in bars and coffee shops. As a consequence, Muslims

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of these words in Devoll, see de Rapper (forthcoming).

and Christians sometimes appear to be competing for a higher level of *kulturë* or 'civilisation'. Before examining this 'competition', it is necessary to have a closer look at local ideas about 'culture'.

## Culture

The Albanian word *kulturë* is probably best translated as 'civilisation', if we have in mind the opposition between German *Kultur* and French *civilisation* as described by Elias (1973). The word is used in Devoll to qualify ideas and behaviours, practices and artefacts in the spheres of family and gender relations, architecture, food, clothes, and education. Albanian *kulturë* shares with 'civilisation' its close connection to the West: it is explicitly said to come from Western Europe and Northern America. When a feature qualified as *me kulturë* is opposed to another one qualified as *pa kulturë*, the former can generally be understood as more 'European' and the latter as more 'local' or, as we shall see, 'Oriental'. We shall also see in the next section that this Western orientation is typical of 'culture' in the post-communist context. In earlier periods it might have been more ambiguous, for instance when modernising trends would come from the Soviet Union or, earlier in history, from Istanbul.

To 'have culture' means, for instance, speaking foreign languages, among which English, French, and Italian are today especially valued. It also means speaking Albanian in the standardised form rather than in a local dialect. Depending on context, Devollis will either insist on the proximity of their dialect to the 'literate language' (*gjuhë letrare*), both based on southern variants of Albanian, or on its local peculiarities which make it a 'coarse' (*i trashë*) language. In the first case, they assert their belonging to what is generally considered as the more 'civilised' part of Albania; in the second case, they put forward their local characters, as inhabitants of a peripheral and rural area. The standardised language is also evidence of a better education and a prerequisite for contact with the outside world. This explains why schools and education are themselves a part of 'culture'. They are an indicator of the village's level of modernisation and they allow villagers an access to knowledge about the outside world.

The stress on 'culture' as something superior and coming from the West does not mean that local 'culture' is not valued at all. For instance, when they contrast their generosity and hospitality with the miserliness of their Christian neighbours, Muslim Devollis claim that such local (and national) traditional values illustrate their moral superiority over Christians. Moreover, the valorisation of tradition and local heritage is itself a part of 'culture': to care for your own past is to be 'civilised'. The protection of environment, architectural heritage, and traditional songs and dances is an indicator of 'culture'. On the contrary, the 'uncivilised' do not know where they come from. They have no 'roots' (*rrënjë*) and are ready to destroy their heritage (in the same way as they spend money without counting). In this matter, the outside world (Europe) is again presented as the model to be followed. In the summer of 1996, complaining about people from the neighbouring Muslim village cutting wood in his village's forests, a Christian villager told me: 'Everywhere in the world, forests are protected with fanaticism, but here, they [Muslims] know only to destroy them'. 'Culture' thus poses the question of imitation: it has to

be acquired from outside, through imitation of foreign models; but the 'cultured' one should be able to distinguish between what is to be copied and what is to be avoided. As Alexandra Bakalaki reminds us in another context (the modernisation of Greek society in the 1950s and 1960s), there is nothing worse than those *copies non conformes* which only prove one's inability to assimilate culture and modernity (Bakalaki 2005).

To sum up, *kulturë* has to do with 'high culture' rather than with culturalist ideas about culture. It does not reflect the identity of a particular group but is, on the contrary, universal and normative. It also appears to be a means of classifying people by referring to a third term, Europe or the West. There are, so to speak, two kinds of people: the ones who have *kulturë*, and the ones who do not. The first ones are superior because they are closer to the West; they are 'in advance' (*përpara*) because they are already familiar with what is seen as the future, westernisation. 'Culture' is thus a synonym for 'progress' and 'modernity'. In Devoll, Christians claim to have more 'culture' than Muslims, and Muslims generally look at Christians as having more 'culture'. Where does this Christian high level of 'culture' come from?

## **Muslims, Christians and the origin of 'culture'**

In this section, I would like to give the main features of the general pattern that connects the Christian Devollis with 'culture'. Culture is not only connected to the future as the road that leads toward Europe; it is also rooted in the past: the high level of culture enjoyed by Christians is the result of history. A man from Arëzë, a Muslim village in Upper Devoll, says:

Christian villages are superior to Muslim ones. People have more culture, they are cleaner. This is because they went on migration (*kurbet*) and received more influence from outside.

It is generally acknowledged that Christians took their culture from outside. Christianity is sometimes said to be of higher culture by itself, or because of its anteriority to Islam. Most of the time, however, the distinction between Muslims and Christians in terms of culture refers to a specific period of time, the time of *kurbet*.

Christians are said to be the first ones to have left their villages in Devoll to work in foreign cities and distant lands. In this historical pattern, Christians would leave for periods of time from several months to five years or more and come back from abroad with money, with new ideas and behaviours, and with new technologies and skills. At the same time, Muslims would remain on their fields and lands, with no connection with the outside world except for the 'Oriental' Turkish empire. A man from Miras, another Muslim village, explains:

Christian villages have more culture because they went on migration, and they brought culture back from the countries they went to, especially from America. They would go on migration more easily because they had more money. They had more money because they were clever, and they were clever because they had schools.

In this view, Christians seem to be engaged in a virtuous cycle (schools → intelligence → money → migration → culture → schools) from which Muslims seem to be

excluded. A Christian man from Sinicë, a mixed village in Upper Devoll, also links culture with schools and migration, and adds another explicative factor: land ownership.

At the time of the Turkish empire, Christians had no right to possess land. This is why they would choose to go to school or to migrate. That is why they received more influence from abroad. This is what happened to the Christian villages in Devoll, and also in Dropull<sup>2</sup>: they have more culture.

I will come back later to the role of history (and especially of pre-communist history) in local interpretations of Muslim/Christian differences. What the local explanations quoted above seem to reveal is the use of 'culture' as an expression for what can be considered as a kind of 'class conflict'. Behind the culture granted to Christians, it is possible to see the valorisation of an urban or cosmopolitan educated elite threatened by ill-mannered and 'stupid' peasants who nonetheless hold power positions in the 'Turkish empire'. Such a pattern opposing the educated to the 'rustics' (Murray 1978: 237) has been studied in other historical contexts (Murray 1978; Vernant 1966) and seems to rely on general distinctions between village and town, local and cosmopolitan, mountains and plains. It is striking, for instance, how Christian villages are described by both their inhabitants and the Muslims of nearby villages as characterised by 'urban' features: villagers are said to live 'as in city' (*si në qytet*). Paved streets, two-storeys houses, electricity, plumbing, and sewerage systems are all said to have been known in Christian villages as early as the 1930s, while Muslim villages have supposedly remained, even today, extremely 'rural'. Also, as noted earlier, schools and literacy are, almost without exception, associated with Christians. In this competition for the oldest schools opened in the region, the usual nationalist rhetoric stigmatising Greek schools and valuing the first Albanian schools is of little concern: no matter what the language was, Christian villages were the first ones to send their children to school and thus to grant them access to 'culture'. In this pattern, literacy not only provides an access to valuable knowledge about the world, it also makes you aware of who you are and where you come from. One day in the winter of 1996, after collecting a genealogy from a family in the Muslim village of Menkulas, the conversation with my hosts went on with questions of family and kinship organisation. One of the family men, in order to explain and justify the difficulties they encountered in the recollection of the family's ancestors, suggested a typical comparison between Muslims and Christians:

Christians know their family lines (*fis*) much better than Muslims. It is because they get married in church, where they keep a written record of all the names. They can always go back to these documents and find information on their family lines. We Muslims get married in the town hall: we have no written record dating back before the creation of the state.

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<sup>2</sup> Dropull is the name of the upper part of the Drino valley, between Gjirokastrë and the Greek border. It is inhabited by Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians who, starting at the end of the 19th century, used to migrate to the United States. The region is thus known for its higher level of development and culture.

In this case, it is worth noticing that the distinction between Muslims and Christians is not presented as an absolute one: the former also have access to written records, but it came later in time; Christians were first but Muslims are following them. The distinction between Muslims and Christians in terms of 'culture' is indeed generally presented as the result of a historical process which was first experienced by Christians: driven from the plains to the mountains by Muslims who enjoyed a better socio-economic position in the Ottoman empire, Christians were forced to migrate in order to escape the less hospitable environment of mountain villages. Migration provided them with money to build schools and modernise their villages; it also connected them to the West and its 'culture', and that is why they are 'in advance'.

Although expressed in a simplified and mechanical way, this process probably has some historical truth. Pirro Thomo (1985) from the village of Dardhë, has shown how work migration was responsible for the development of his Christian mountain village at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nathalie Clayer (2007: 126) confirms that, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, migration first involved Christian inhabitants of the *sandjak* of Korçë (as well as those of Bitola, of today's Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Servia, of today's Northern Greece) while Muslims were encouraged by Ottoman authorities to stay within the empire, where they formed a pool of potential recruits for the army. Many Muslims from the area – and from Devoll in particular – would, however, migrate and work in cities of the empire. Contrary to what Christians claim today, they were not excluded from migration and were also responsible for the socio-economic transformations the region experienced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Muslims migrants actually played a role later on, after Albania became an independent state (1913), when they started working in North America, Australia, and elsewhere. Some Muslim villages in Devoll, such as Sul, are represented today by their inhabitants as having been touched by migration just like Christian villages: returnees would build large stone houses giving the village a more 'urban' look, they would bring back objects and habits unknown to the locals, and they are said to have raised funds to open the first Albanian school in the village, around 1914-1916, when only a few villages had such schools. It is worth noting that in 1996, inhabitants of Sul were pleased to tell me that there was no coffee shop in the village: according to them, it was a sign of 'culture' not to spend their time drinking or playing cards instead of working, like they supposedly do in other Muslim villages.

Generally speaking, however, according to Nathalie Clayer, the unequal access to long distance migration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century worked to reinforce the difference between Muslims and Christians – a situation that reminds us of present-day migration to Greece, in which Muslims are again less favoured than Christians. She also points out that the region experienced reforms that other Albanian-inhabited regions of the empire did not experience (Clayer 2007: 127). Social and political transformations resulting from these reforms include the development of an educated middle class (both Muslim and Christian), as is, for instance, illustrated in the case of Korçë with the demand of 'modern' pieces of furniture by 'many families' (Ciko 1983: 286–287). As a result, some local artisans went and spent a few months in the West in order to 'get acquainted with modern advances in [their] field and learn from them in the hope of gaining a large clientele' (Ciko 1983: 286).



Also of importance, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the growing involvement of foreigners (mostly Europeans) in the internal affairs of that part of the empire, and especially in the protection of its Christian inhabitants, a fact that is likely to have modified the relations between Muslims and Christians (Clayer 2007: 128). In Devoll, Muslims and Christians alike admit that the latter benefited from Greek support in their access to 'culture', especially through the funding of schools at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that that became a source of inequality. Such a situation reminds us, once again, of the one that prevailed in the 1990s and 2000s. As such, Christians are said to be favoured by Greece, either in migration or through local projects in Albania. Those parallels are not only indicative of a kind of continuity in the relations between Muslims and Christians in this border area; they are also an evidence of how the present informs the past and its significations.

It is indeed unlikely that the relation of Muslims and Christians with the idea of 'culture', as observed in the 1990s, was shaped entirely a century before. The focus on the period of *kurbet* should not be taken for granted and should rather be understood in the context of post-communist Albania: the liberalisation of religion and the revitalisation of religious communities, together with the opening of the country's borders and renewed contact with the West in the early 1990s, are likely to be responsible for the centrality of the idea of 'culture' in Muslim/Christian relations.

Communist Albania most likely played a role in the reshaping of those relations in terms of 'culture'. It is striking, for instance, that the content given to 'culture' when people refer to *kurbet* and its impact is very close to what were (and, to some extent, still are) presented as the major achievements of communist Albania. In their study of 'changes in the way of life of today's peasantry', published in 1985, anthropologists Andromaqi Gjergji, Abaz Dojaka, and Mark Tirta (1985) review the consequences of socio-economic transformations on the way of life in villages all over the country. Their altogether optimistic assessment starts with the 'material conditions of existence', including the following topics: village planimetry, water distribution, roads, commerce and craftsmanship, cultural institutions (museum, libraries), domestic architecture and equipment, electrification, personal hygiene, clothes, and food. Family and gender relations are studied as another indicator of modernisation. The growing number of nuclear families, to the detriment of joint families, is seen as a positive change. It is considered to be evidence of the loss of authority of the traditional patriarchal family and to allow for inter-generational and gender relations which are considered more in accordance with urban and modern patterns. The development of education and literacy is also presented as a major feature in the modernisation of villages, together with the eradication of religious beliefs and practices. Finally, population movements and displacements are seen as a fundamental factor in development and modernisation as they break isolation and open up people's minds to the world outside their villages.

All these features (material condition of existence, family relations, education, and contact through migration) have been identified as what 'culture' means to today's Devollis (de Rapper 2002a: 194–195). There seems to be a clear parallel between 'culture' as it is understood today and the communist modernist project. Even if the West is not

mentioned in the communist project as the source of ‘culture’ and as a model to be followed, modernisation is conceived, first of all, as the realisation of a kind of universal model and to a lesser extent as the realisation of a peculiar Albanian ‘culture’. Communism was ‘the future of the world’ (Lubonja 2002: 94); a dream that had become reality outside national borders, in the Soviet Union, but whose realisation was expected in Albania.

What was the state of relations between Muslims and Christians in Devoll during that period? I have no data on the participation of Muslims and Christians in the partisan movement during the Second World War and the communist takeover of the 1940s. The role of southern Christians in the development of the communist movement is generally acknowledged and I have found no evidence of strong anti-communist feelings among the Christians I met. Many of them have had access to interesting careers in various administrations and do not seem to have been underrepresented in highly trained professions (engineers, doctors, teachers, etc.). Some of them, for reasons relating to their status as members of a national minority, are said to have been favoured by the regime: the Macedonian-speaking Christians of Vërnik supposedly had a privileged access to university education.

As noted earlier, intermarriage remained the exception even after 1967, when, to quote a Christian informant from Sinicë, whose son has married a Muslim woman, ‘Enver Hoxha decided that Muslims and Christians were all alike’. Some people from the Christian villages of Upper Devoll tell that traditional religious endogamy became a problem when, in the 1960s and 1970s, more and more Christian girls got married in town rather than in their own villages, as used to be the rule, in order to escape from life and work in agricultural cooperatives. As a man from those villages, married to a Muslim woman, says pleasantly, ‘that was the time when we Christian boys were sent to Muslim villages to bring back wives.’ Many families also left at that time to go to Korçë or Tirana in search for a better and urban life; as a result, at the beginning of the 1990s, Christian villages were generally less populated than Muslim ones. Given the restriction upon village-to-town migration in communist times, the ongoing opportunities for Christians to leave their villages can be interpreted as a sign of their better position among the communist authorities and networks, a point that would however need further investigation. It nevertheless sustains the idea of a privileged relation of Christians to the urban world, both in actual practice and in representations, and in the eyes of both Christians and Muslims. According to one informant from Sul, the village of Bradvicë, located in the mountain above Sul, is illustrative of this pattern: due to the high official positions held by some of its inhabitants in the communist state or party, many of their families eventually moved to Tirana, leaving the village almost empty. By the 1990s, some of them started to come back to the village on holidays, turning old abandoned houses into second homes and thus bringing new habits: such a use of village territory and buildings was considered an innovation, known only the Greek villages on the other side of the border.

Finally, other observations seem to support the idea of the relatively privileged position of Christians during communism: for instance, and as far as I could determine, the destruction of places of cult in 1967 and afterwards seems to have been more systematic in the case of Muslim places, while Christian places (although closed as cult places and dedicated to secular usage) have more often been spared as ‘cultural monuments’ (*monu-*

ment culture). Also, as far as I could determine, religious first names, formally forbidden in 1976, seem to have survived better among Christians than among Muslims. They seem to have reappeared more easily after 1990, for newborn children as well as for children and adults who got baptised when religious practices were authorised again. Muslim names, on the contrary, do not seem to have regained favour.

Once again, this is indicative of the fact that, notwithstanding the impact of communism, the present state of relations between Muslims and Christians and their competing claims for 'culture' cannot be explored without taking into account the context of the 1990s. The 'resurfacing' of Christianity at the beginning of the 1990s seems to have preceded the 'resurfacing of Islam' (Trix 1995). For instance, in the case of the reconstruction of cult places in Bilisht, the reconstruction of the Orthodox church of Saint Veneranda (*Shën e Premte*) started in 1992, three years before the new mosque was built (1995).

This context actually sheds light on what 'culture' means: the stress on the West as the origin of 'culture', as found in the 'historic' narratives on culture and *kurbet*, can probably not be dissociated from what Fatos Lubonja (2002, 2004) calls 'the myth of the West', as it developed in the early 1990s. On the one hand, the idealisation of the West as a Promised Land or as a Saviour was probably nourished by memories of pre-war migration to America. On the other hand, this idealisation certainly contributed to the valorisation of *kurbet* as a Golden Age and as the origin of 'culture'. In other words, the myth of the West is at the same time a product of migration memory and a producer of this memory. 'Culture', along with the Christian religion, became at that time a highly symbolic factor in asserting a European or Western identity. Just as 'the Christianity of the Albanians before the Turkish invasion was treated as a Western identity' (Lubonja 2002: 101), so was the 'culture' of Christians before communism (in the Devoll) treated as evidence of their readiness to come back to Europe and the West. On the contrary, Muslims are generally associated with the East: most of their characteristics are said to be of Turkish and Arabic origin (they behave *allaturka* while Christians behave *allafranga*) and some of them, regarding the status of women for instance, are considered to be 'orientalisms' (*orientalizëm*). As a Westerner, I have been frequently asked to assess the degree of 'orientalism' of various elements of Albanian culture: did Albanian music sound oriental to me? Did Albanian food taste oriental to me?

## Negotiating 'culture'

'Culture' thus appears very close to the idea of 'progress' identified by Bojidar Alexiev (2005: 31) as a means to 'classify human communities in two groups, backward and advanced', which can be superposed on a pre-existing religious difference. The local rationalisation of 'culture' in historical terms gives Christians symbolic advantages in the context of the 1990s by emphasising their proximity to the West and their ability to get even closer. This last section is an attempt to show that Muslims are nonetheless not passive victims of this symbolic domination by Christians. Unlike religious affiliation, often taken, as noted earlier, for a kind of 'racial' identity, 'culture' can be negotiated.

We have seen with the case of Sul that Muslim villages sometimes claim participation in the historical pattern which links 'culture' to pre-war migration to the West.

Historical and genealogical data actually support the idea that migration occurred among Muslim villages and that it had the same kind of impact it had on Christian villages in terms of innovation and modernisation, although on a reduced scale. In the same way, individuals can be granted 'culture' notwithstanding their religious affiliation. The criteria will, however, be the same as the ones which make Christians more 'cultured' than Muslims: language and education, behaviour, knowledge or direct contact with the West, etc. Actually, because 'culture' is conceived as a universal and historic trend that leads humanity from backwardness to modernity, even Christians who claim that they have more 'culture' than Muslims recognise that the latter (at least in Devoll) are becoming more and more 'cultured'. This process occurs either by imitating Christians or by direct contact with the West through labour migration. In the mixed village of Sinicë, an elderly Christian man explains for instance that:

Muslims are not acting as Christians are. [...] As for the wedding, Christians get married as they do in the West: they go to church and then have a party. Ten years ago, Muslims would practice another kind of marriage, but now they copy the Christian way.

At the same time, Christians commonly stigmatise the inability or unwillingness of Muslims to 'learn' (*mësoj*) from Christians. In the same village, a young educated Christian explains that:

Even in Sinicë, which is a mixed village, Muslims are lower, they have less culture than Christians. This makes me think that the differences between Muslims and Christians are hereditary up to 90%. Muslims from Sinicë have the opportunity to enter Christian homes, but they just don't learn; they won't change.

The general pattern is, however, to recognise that Muslims have changed and that, by imitating Christian ways, they are becoming more 'cultured'.

The idea of Muslims becoming closer to Christians finally allows Muslims to take part in 'culture' at a more collective level. When opposing themselves, as inhabitants of a specific region, to other regions in Albania, Muslims and Christians alike typically claim a high level of 'culture'. The qualities generally granted to Christians (migration, open-mindedness, peacefulness, hard work) are then attributed to all inhabitants, as Devollis rather than as Muslims or Christians. With respect to the rest of Albania, Devollis claim – and to a certain extent are recognized as having – a higher level of 'culture'. This is especially the case when they compare their southern region to northern regions of Albania, who are commonly said to lack 'culture'. There is a striking parallel between the way Christians talk about Muslims as having less 'culture' – within the context of Devoll – and the way both Muslim and Christian Devollis talk about 'Northerners' (*ata të veriut*). The latter are presented as violent and backward mountain people – generally referred to by the derogatory name *malok*, from *mal*, 'mountain' – who, until recently, lacked everything that contributed to the state of 'culture' enjoyed by Devollis: they speak a coarse dialect very far from standardised Albanian; they live in poor conditions of hygiene and are not familiar with contemporary cooking or clothes; they are scattered in small familial settlements

instead of living in large villages (which, as noted earlier, are often described as being closer to urban models); they live under the rule of severe traditions, especially in the spheres of religion and of family and gender relations; and they have greater difficulty adapting to a foreign environment when they migrate to Greece or Italy. It is common to hear contrasted descriptions of northern and local migrants in terms of border crossings (the former cross illegally, the latter legally), work relations (the former are untrustworthy and lazy), and so on. The parallels between Christian stereotypes of Muslims and southern stereotypes of northerners are so remarkable that I suggested in a previous publication that mutual representations of Muslims and Christians, in the context of Devoll, can be considered as a matrix for representations of more distant groups (de Rapper 2004).

The Devollis' collective and regional claim to a higher 'culture' exists also in relation to Greece. Migrants from Devoll – largely Muslim – who live and work in Greece seem to refer to 'culture' in reaction to the discrimination and bad treatment they experience in that country, as Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers suggests (see this volume). Although Greece is known as an entry point to the West, or as a part of the West, Devollis are quick to criticise Greeks – and especially their Greek employers – for having a lower level of 'culture': their education system is said to be of low quality, most of them are said to have been to school for a very short time and to have very little knowledge on the outside world (and especially of Albania); they are also said to spend a lot of time in coffee shops and bars while their Albanian employees are working hard. In this case 'culture' is not attributed or denied to religious groups but national ones. Nevertheless, because the border between Greece and Albania in Devoll is easily perceived (on both sides) as a border between a Christian country and a Muslim one and because Devoll migrants usually feel discriminated against as Muslims, the stigmatisation of Greeks as less 'cultured' might be interpreted as a way to assert the higher level of 'culture' of local Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show how local ideas about 'culture' can inform us about the meaning of being Muslim or Christian in Devoll in the 1990s. 'Culture' appears as a way to classify people by reference to a third term, the West, perceived as the place of origin of 'culture'. This classification seems to be easily superposed on the religious opposition between Muslims and Christians. As a result, each 'religion' is granted a level of 'culture' and a position in local society. Such an easy superposition can be explained by the fact that Muslims and Christians – notwithstanding the usual assertions of the irrelevance of religious identities in Albanian society – already consider themselves to belong to two distinct groups which should not intermarry and which claim to have their own moral values. Christians are generally recognized as having more 'culture', but this superior position is challenged in various ways and is sometimes shared with Muslims. The relative positions of Muslims and Christians thus appear to be changing not only in time, as has probably been the case, but according to the 'system' they are considered to be parts of: a single mixed village in which Muslims and Christians live side by side; a group of villages competing for land or other resources; Devoll and its upper and lower parts; Devoll in relation with the city and district of Korçë; southern Albania opposed to north-

ern Albania; Devoll as a border district. For this reason, it seems difficult to talk about Muslim/Christian relations in Albania without taking into account local configurations and the way they relate Muslims and Christians to wider configurations.

Furthermore, the stress on 'culture' by both Muslims and Christians is indicative of the fact that studies of religious coexistence in Albania should not be limited to religious manifestations (either common practices or evidences of extremism and hatred), but should also take into account all social representations and practices that are used to create and reproduce differences between the local groups identified as 'religions'. In that way, the reshaping of relations between these groups appears as one of the various reconfigurations taking place in post-socialist Albania. On one hand, it shows that, notwithstanding the communist ban, religion has remained a means of classifying people; on the other hand it emphasises the fact that post-socialist religious revitalisation goes beyond the sole manifestations of religious feelings and practices.

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## **POVZETEK**

Izhodiščna tema prispevka se nanaša na pomen religije v postkomunistični Albaniji. Etnografski izsledki temeljijo na podatkih iz terenske raziskave v regiji Devol v južni Albaniji sredi devetdesetih let preteklega stoletja. Avtor analizira pomen in vlogo religije med domačini Devolija. Po eni strani postavi pod vprašaj splošno predpostavko, da religija v Albaniji ni pomembna, medtem ko po drugi strani zagovarja, da v Devolu obstajajo temelji za razvoj verskih sporov in fundamentalizma. Avtor preko razčlenitve lokalnih pomenov termina 'kulture' analizira odnose med muslimani (ki so številčno v večini) in pravoslavni kristjani. Domačini enačijo 'kulturo' s 'civilizacijo' ali 'izobrazbo' in na ta način kategorizirajo posameznike ter verske skupnosti, ob čemer pravoslavni kristjanom pripisujejo 'večjo stopnjo kulture' kot muslimanom. Namen prispevka je v razumevanju pomena tovrstnih hierarhičnih kategorizacij o stopnji kulture muslimanov in pravoslavcev, ter v razlagi uporabe teh kategorij v sedanjih odnosih med omenjenima verskima skupnostima.

**KLUČNE BESEDE:** Albanija, religija, kultura.

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