Albanians, Albanianism and the strategic subversion of stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

This contribution describes the ways in which various European host countries' stereotypical imageries of Albanians as being culturally particularly prone to violence have forced contemporary transnational Albanian migrants into subversive strategies and practices of identity mimicry. This powerful stereotypical imagery, a sub-category of balkanism known as Albanianism, can be traced through various European historical literature and contemporary policy as well as in historical auto-imagery which all have always mutually mirrored and influenced each other. The study finds that 'Albanian violence' valorised according to political and economic interests, i.e. romantically glorified as 'noble' or demonised – typically in reference to customary *kanun* traditions and customary ideals of heroism, manly courage and honour – in both hetero- and auto-imageries. But, equally, mutually sceptical attitudes (Occidentalist and Orientalist) can be identified as well as the historical precedents for outsiders appropriating paternalist protectionism towards the Albanians in reference to 'primitive' local customs. In the end it emerges that, today, it is exactly those criminals – who by their actions help to perpetuate essentialist generalisations of Albanian violence – are the ones benefiting from contemporary Albanianism in implicit discursive alliance with contemporary, exclusivist, immigration policy.

KEYWORDS: stereotypes, migration, identity strategies, *kanun*, violence.

Introduction

> Kangë Përndimi, kangë njeriu të dehun nga besimi në vetë …
> (Migjeni in Pipa 1978: 151-152)[1]

It has been suggested that Albania serves the 'ideal balkan type – violent, independent, and at times untrustworthy', one which, ahistorically, 'both touched Lord Byron's creative fantasies and haunts Robert Kaplan's recent travels' (Blumi 1998: 528). In tackling 'Albanianism', this contribution aims to go beyond the classic focus of the balkanist debate, which has paid particular attention to the global politics of representation and the impact of Western imageries of the Balkans on diplomatic and military policy. Rather, the paper aims to explore the discursive field of mutual perceptions between Albanians and the outside world as it has developed in new situations of contact, the historical trajectories of this field in the Albanian, English and German contexts, and the ways in which mutual perceptions inform the everyday practices and survival strategies of those Albanians identified by them. Assuming that images may have an impact on real lives, Albanians will be discussed as actors who, in changing historical contexts, react to, subvert, produce and reproduce, and sometimes manipulate the stereotypes projected onto them by outsiders. In rejecting the idea that balkanist constructions are passively received, both implicit ideological alliances and antagonisms between the Albanian and Western essentialisation of 'Albanianness' can be sought, and those who benefit or suffer from such generalisations can be identified.

After restrictions on mobility ceased in Albania after 1992, both international intervention and outward migration have brought Albanians and the 'West'[2] into regular contact. Economic migration (*kurbet*) and the 'brain-drain' have taken at least one, usually male, member of nearly every Albanian family into the wider world.[3] At the same time an abundance of international consultants, investors, aid workers, members of non-governmental organisations and military personnel, amongst others, have ventured into the country. Various interests underpinned the new contacts between Albanians and Westerners. These interests defined the character of interaction by shaping and re-evoking, but also at times transforming, the 'gaze upon the other'. As Joep Leerssen puts it:

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[1] 'Song of the West, song of man drunk with self-confidence…' (translated by Elsie 1993: 25) and written by Migjeni (the acronym of Millosh Gjergji Nikolla, 1911-1938). The poem was most probably produced in 1935 (see Pipa 1978: 151–152).

[2] I use the term 'the West' as the semantic opposite to local culture, the opposition being characterised by an unbalanced, hegemonic relation of economic and political power (see Herzfeld 2001: 83).

[3] The estimates in 1999 were 500,000 in Greece, 200,000 in Italy, 12,000 in Germany, 12,000 in the USA, 5,000 in Canada, 2,500 in Belgium, 2,000 in France and 2,000 in Turkey. Only recently has the UK become a favourite destination, due to the tightening of asylum laws on the continent. The Albanian population in 1998 was 3,284,000, of which an approximate 15.6 percent, mostly young or middle-aged men (70.7 percent of all emigrants), had emigrated. Emigrants' remittances constitute an estimated one fifth of the nation's gross domestic product, with one émigré assumed to support the subsistence of up to five family members at home (see *Albanian human development report 2000*; Gjonça 2002).

... stereotypes can be positive or negative in their valorization, depending on the political circumstances: countries which present a threat or political or economic rivalry are usually described in negative terms, giving rise to xenophobia; countries which do not pose any threat are represented in 'cute' terms, giving rise to exoticism or 'xenophilia' (Leerssen, http://www.hum.uva.nl/images/info/ology.html, emphasis in the original).

The following exploration of Albanianism and its stereotypes is based on participant observation conducted as part of both social anthropological fieldwork and international expert consultancy in various arenas of contact in Kosovo, Albania, Germany and the UK from 1992 to 2002.

Mimicry and implicit alliances

When venturing into the prosperous West, most individual Albanians, unlike other European migrant workers relatively unprotected by EU legislation and confronted with strong ethnicised stereotypes, have felt the need to hide their nationality. As will be shown below, many migrant Albanians become masters of effective strategies of mimicry in order to circumvent structural social exclusion resulting from negative essentialisation.[4]

Illir,[5] a former asylum seeker from an economically desolate north Albanian city, arrived with his young wife in the United Kingdom in 1995. They were granted permits to stay by pretending to be Kosovars, at that time recognised as victims of political and ethnic persecution in the former Yugoslavia. Illir now works in an Italian coffee shop in Soho, London, and can rely on speaking Italian fluently enough to convince even Italian tourists and customers that he is one of their own. Similiarly, Shtjefen, Artan and Bernard,[6] Albanians from Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania respectively, worked in a Greek restaurant in Berlin from 1993 to 2001, when the local council closed the restaurant because of tax debts. They worked *schwarz* ('black', illegal) chefs in this émigré family business and customers would take them for Greeks. The restaurant's working language was Greek, although the owner could not find 'real' Greeks to work for sufficiently low pay and, at the same time, to accept the insecurities of illegal employment. Edlira[7] arrived in London from Tirana only half a year ago, pursuing her studies on an EU scholarship. While seeking an affordable bedsit in London she felt the need to pretend to be an Italian:

When I had moved in, my landlady told me that if she had known already on the phone that I was actually an Albanian, she would not have invited me to see the place at all. She had just seen that horrible BBC documentary and said that she thought that all Albanians are criminals and prostitutes. She was completely surprised that I was just the way I am, I mean like normal.

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[4] For an excellent study of the identity and name-changing strategies of Albanian migrant workers to Greece see Kretsi (2002).

[5] Informal interview in Soho, November 2001. In the following sections, all personal names have been changed.

[6] Based on repeated casual conversations in the period from February 1999 to March 2002 in Berlin.

[7] Personal acquaintance, known to me from October 2001, London.

Klenta,[8] who similiarly came to Berlin on a scholarship in 1992, soon married her German boyfriend, thereby gaining not only a German surname and passport but also independence from visa and European residence restrictions. Engjel[9] pretends to be an Italian called Angelo. Since moving out of accommodation provided by the local council for asylum seekers he has lived in a house in suburban London shared with three other internationals, two Italian men and a German woman, and the latter he likes very much. He feels he ought to confess to her that he is not really an Italian so that the relationship can develop in a more honest way. However, he fears that the others would not want to share a house with him if they discover that he is an Albania. His asylum case is still pending. However, despite uncomfortably living with an untruth, and despite the severe uncertainties concerning his future, Engjel has developed a successful pop-singing career performing songs in Italian and English in small concerts and competitions. Genc, Arben and Mark,[10] from different parts of Albania, run a Bayswater car wash for London taxis where customers vaguely believe them to be from some southern migrant country, perhaps Lebanon, Portugal or Yugoslavia. This is also true for many of their friends who, with or without university degrees, work in construction on the nearby Paddington Central site and support extended families both in Kosovo and Albania.

The need for strategic mimicry and humble disguise in the face of a powerful yet (with regard to Albania) ignorant West, comes as a shock to most Albanian émigrés. As the Albanian philosopher Fatos Lubonja (2000: 15) points out, under Enver Hoxha's isolated, totalitarian regime Albanians were raised to believe themselves 'the navel of the world', a paradise amidst demonic others. Lubonja recalls, for example, that when he was a political prisoner and the news filtered through that President Bush and Gorbatchev were meeting for the first time, the inmates believed the two world leaders had convened solely for the purpose of deciding what to do with Albania. Both to be at the centre of world attention and to exhibit paranoia about the ambitions of that outside world were integral features of ideological socialisation (Lubonja 2002). Therefore, as Lubonja suggests, many Albanians have found their illusions about themselves shattered after 1992 as they suddenly confront the West and its legal and institutional framework of exclusion. The attempt to maintain an exaggerated sense of significance in the face of the challenges brought on by becoming an 'illegal immigrant' has inevitably lead to humiliation. Indeed, those migrants equipped with sufficient cultural capital, as in the examples cited above, find alternatives ways to circumvent structural exclusion through individual strategies of mimicry.

Although, as the above examples suggest, the average practices is for Albanians to seek honest work and an honest life despite being in a position of vulnerability, there are also those who have chosen criminal routes to success. This group both profits from and reproduces Albanianist identification in terms of the most negative stereotypes and

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[8] Personal acquaintance, known to me since 1996, Berlin.
[9] Personal acquaintance, known to me from 1998, London.
[10] Respondents in informal discussion during repeated car washes, 2001–2003, London.

Home Office assumptions.[11] Instances in kind were observed when the author served as an expert witness in various asylum and criminal cases that involved Albanian offences – including, in a few cases, homicide – in Germany and the UK. In many of these cases, Albanian victims or criminal offenders, in implicit discursive alliance with the host country's legal courts, sought cultural explanation for violence in the Albanian *kanun*.[12] This historical, locally revitalised customary law, based on principles of honour and self-regulation, has become a symbolic short-cut for cultural determinist explanations of Albanian violence.[13] However, in all cases studied the anthropological inquiries brought to the fore the fact that, in contrast to the notion of cultural pre-determination, the violent deeds and threats were usually driven by informal economic interest, competition for power and internal peer group pressures, as can typically be found with other marginalized ethnic groups which have formed criminal gangs in Western inner cities.[14] At the same time, desperate asylum seekers facing rejection have equally taken recourse to 'cultural defence'[15] for their residency, including the citing of vendetta and its related problems. Indeed, although this does not conventionally lead to the granting of asylum, in such cases the Home Office's letter of refusal usually declares an awareness of this 'centuries-old tradition of blood feud in Albania', even in cases from southern Albania or from the cities where such tradition has no historical roots.

Thus, there are various realms in which Albanians can expect to be identified in terms of a *kanun* culture of violence. For the actual criminals, a reputation based on such stereotypes may serve not only to justify their deeds but also to effectively deter competing criminal groups from transgressing spheres of vested informal interests. Those migrant Albanians who in rhetoric and practice, and in implicit alliance with the stereotypes embedded in institutions and agencies of the host culture, have helped to reproduce a general image of Albanians as violent, may have affected a majority of Albanians who would wish not to have to use everyday strategies of mimicry in response to such identifications. However, the identification of Albanians with *kanun* culture has historical roots which will be sought both inside and outside Albania in the following section.

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[11] Highlighting the latent 'potential threat' of particularly 'ethnic Albanian organised crime' are the National Criminal Intelligence Services (NCIS), (see *UK Threat Assessements of serious and organised crime 2002*, http://www.ncis.gov.uk/press/2002/261102.asp).

[12] The historic designation for local customary law, *kanun*, refers to local, usually orally transmitted rules of self-regulation and self-administration which was conceptually juxtaposed to the religious state law (*shari'ah*) and to the law governing relations between cities and villages (*kanun-name*) (see Höcker-Weyand 1990: 98). The most prominently known law, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjin*, refers to a north Albanian regional variation which is based on the myth of a local medieval tribal chief, Lekë Dukagjin. The best known source is Shtjefen Gjeçov, *Kanun i Lekë Dukagjinit* (1933). For a collection of detail variations of customary law, see Magaret Hasluck, *The unwritten law in Albania* (1954).

[13] In fact, rather than serve as an excuse, the proof of *kanun* at work would have served only to document the pre-meditation of murder. However, my explanations tried to document historicity, variety and change of culture, thereby pointing to new, brutalised codes of honour developing in marginalised niches, and often socialised in violently suppressive or militaristic environments.

[14] For example Puerto Rican gangs in inner-city New York (see Bourgois 1995).

[15] The critical debate on 'cultural defence' originates in the USA (e.g. Koptiuch 1996).

Mirror Albanianism

With critical reference to the balkanist debate, it has been suggested that culturalist image constructions of South-East Europe cannot exclusively be sourced in the West (see Bracewell and Drace-Francis 1999: 60). The effects of ideological mirroring (see Konstantinović 1988), as well as of the emerging regional conflicts and processes of national differentiation that took place in the Balkans during the nineteenth century, should also be taken into account (Sundhaussen 1999). Within the national 'revival' periods and literatures, including the relatively late, so-called, *rilindja* ('revival') of the Albanian nation, Western imagery (hetero-images) was already being mirrored by the developing national self-imageries (auto-images) of South-East Europe. Members of the regional intellectual elites, although distanced from the peasant population, reproduced Gottfried Herder's romantic ideal-type notions of the national language, poetry, history and self-determination of the *Völker*, and began to define nationhood by claiming cultural autochthony and territorial continuity from ancient times. With increasing regional tensions over national territory, these identifications became more aggressively defined against competing others (Konstantinoviæ 1988: 290). For example, as part of anti-Albanian nationalist propaganda, Vladan Djordjević (1844-1930), temporarily Serb prime minister, constructed the Albanians ('Arnauts') in a 1913 pamphlet as inferior and thus little capable of nation-building themselves:

> The Arnaut-type is meagre and small, and there is something gypsy-like, Phoenician to it. [They also remind one of] primeval men who slept in trees holding on with their tails. In the later centuries, when men did not need their tails anymore, it wasted away, so that there is only a trace of it left in the little coccyx of contemporary people. Only among the Albanians, it seems, men with tails still existed in the nineteenth century (Georgevitch 1913: 4, author's translations from the German).

Rejecting such denigrations, Albanian elites needed to define the Albanian nation and establish its capacity and right to exist. The indigenous culture, particularly Albanian 'folklore' and language, became the basis of constructing a distinct national identity and pride, and a distinct territorial definition (Pipa 1978: 195). Most prominently, Sami Frashëri produced polemics against Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian claims in the region and situated the Albanians, as defined by their special culture, among new friends:

> All the people of Europe, ... the French, Italians, Germans, Englishmen etc., want to build our nation; they have noticed the bravery [trimëria, *also 'heroism'*] of the Albanians, their *besa* and such outstanding other [*character attributes*] that they otherwise only know from their own people. All writers of Europe have written about us the best way we could possibly wish for; they know us as heroes and men of the *besa*, they know us as the oldest people of Europe and as honourable [*fisçimine*] (Frashëri 1999 [1899]: 76–77, author's translations from the Albanian).

The romanticised attributes and heroic ideals of national character cited here were taken from a reservoir of folk and *kanun* culture, which Austrian and German scholars in particular had been systematically describing from the mid-nineteenth century (see Baxhaku and Kaser 1996). It was these cultural features which Albanian patriot priests (amateur ethnographers like Don L. Mjedia and Shtjefen Gjeçov, who were often the only literates with access to remote regions) soon collected in an attempt to prepare an indigenous, national Albanian code of law (see Konitza 2001: xx-xxxii; Mjedia 1901: 353–358). In such documents, accurate descriptions of the local principles of self-regulation, principles necessary for maintaining order in this remote periphery of the Ottoman Empire, merged with the reproduction of the earlier romantic idealisations of military and national values (masculinity, honour, faithfulness), which were rooted in both Austrian and Prussian cultural projection and in indigenous nationalist aspiration.

However, many Albanians had ambiguous attitudes towards 'the West', an entity which served as a projection screen for both dreams and fears. Writers such as Faik Konitza, Fan Noli or Migjeni displayed, simultaneously, a late national-romantic and a critical modern spirit, targeting Albanian political opportunism as well as the fascist politics of the West. Such differentiated intellectual criticism only ceased with the rising of communist totalitarianism (Lubonja 2000, 2002; see also Pipa 1978: 138). The poet Migjeni, for example, played repeatedly in his poems of the 1920s and 1930s on the double meaning of *perëndim-i*. This translates both as 'the West' (or Occident in the geographical sense) and as 'the place of down-fall' (as in 'sun-down'). His attitudes resulted from the political tensions within Albania of the time. In Migjeni's Northern Albanian home town, Shkoder, the dominant political interest groups promoted 'Occidentalism [in order to disguise] the nature of Albania's real problems, economic and cultural backwardness, by attributing them to the country's "oriental heritage"', and to mark their conservative identifications with the Italian or German fascist leaders of the time (Pipa 1978: 138). Migjeni loathed fascism but assumed that the remedy for Albanian poverty lay in Western-style modernisation. Thus, in communist Albania, Migjeni could posthumously be made a celebrated hero of the national literary canon (although his partly pro-Western attitudes needed to be overlooked).

Through all these periods, however, there remained a nationalist edge to definitions of the 'Albanian soul'. During communism, Albanianness was shaped by 'autochthonous traditions' such as *ndera* (honour), *burrnija* (manliness), and *besa* (the word of honour), as it had been in the nineteenth century (see Maloki 1948). The ideological recourse to historical *kanun* culture served to establish an ethno-cultural continuity based on the assumption that 'in essence, the preservation of customary law was one of the most important elements in helping the Albanian people to maintain their individuality under Ottoman domination'. (Pupovci 1972: lxxx) In order that the project of communist modernisation was not interfered with, however, *kanun* culture could only serve as an ideological a marker of national identity while all expression of living customs had to be safely located in the past. An Albanian encyclopaedia, for example, claims that the *besa* is 'related to the past social order' and is 'an element of our tradition which, within our new society and world view, has merely a moral function: it constitutes one of the most valu-

able, human virtues'. (Fjalori enciklopedik Shqiptar 1985: 86, author's translations from the Albanian)

Thus, paradoxically, while the patriarchal traditions which had survived in the northern mountains were brutally attacked and destroyed (see Pichler 1995), state discourse claimed that the 'Albanian people's character' was rooted in *kanun* culture. Pipa believes that the 'infatuation of socialist realism with folklore' compensated for an actual 'lack of socialist tradition' (Pipa 1978: 196). Certainly, academic disciplines in the period pursued the ideological goal of constructing the nation through the accumulation of evidence for Albanian cultural autochthony and continuity. Even the most prominent Albanian novelists carefully packaged 'tradition' in the past and constructed cultural ideal-types. Ismail Kadare's *Broken April* (1990 [1980]), for example, tells the turn-of-the-century story of a young modern couple, urbanites with whom Albanian communists would have identified, who during their honeymoon in the northern mountains encounter a young local man, Gjorg. According to community expectation, Gjorg is forced to commit revenge murder and is consequently killed in the revenge cycle that closes the book. Those readers familiar with the original text of padre Shtjefen Gjeçov's edition of the *kanun* would immediately recognise verbatim citations during Kadare's explanation of the cultural pressures that are exerted on the feuders. On the one hand, the events of this key novel can be read as critical metaphors for the coercion that the totalitarian system exerted on the individual. This book evaded censorship, however, because – on another level – it so clearly places *kanun* traditions in remote space and time. In Kadare's novel *Doruntine* (1988 [1978]), the *kanun* concept of *besa* is placed even further in the mythological past. Here the author transforms a Byzantine myth of resuscitation into a national ideal-type. The oath of allegiance, *besa*, even transcends the boundaries of death (when the dead brother, Konstantin, fulfils his oath to take home his sister Doruntina) (see Klosi 1991).[16]

Today, Albanian pre-communist and Western styles of politics and social life compete with occasional nostalgia for communism as ideal-type orientations.[17] However, only on the social and geographical northern fringes of the country, neglected by the governments of transitional Albania, poverty ridden and disadvantaged in access to the new, formal resources available through the presence of the West (Sampson 1996), have local Big Men re-invented pre-communist modes of orientation as part of their power strategies. Similarly, it is here that local patriots, usually teachers, have published new *kanun* compilations, continuing old nationalist legacies in the hope, perhaps, of directing some attention to their home regions.[18]

Previous research has shown that self-representation based on patriarchal traditions of honour, masculinity, loyalty (*besa*), and the like, has re-emerged in three particular

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[16] Thanks to Fatos Lubonja for directing my attention to the significance of this novel in this context.
[17] Fieldwork impressions 1992 to 2002.
[18] For example, Xhafer Martini (1999) celebrates the old values embodies in the historical *kanun* variant of Peshkopi, and Xhemal Meçi (1997) discusses the historical national value of the Puka variant.

contexts. It occurs, firstly, where there are no other alternatives available to generate group prestige, economic revenue and a sense of personal dignity in an absence of state power; secondly, where it serves particular local political interest in situations of economic scarcity and resource competition, and thirdly where actual threats against national subjects have been experienced and where new nationalism has been provoked. For example, Albanian fighting units in the recent Kosovar and Macedonian conflicts employed radical nationalist symbolism based on a traditionalist *kanun* rhetoric which glorifies violence (Schwandner-Sievers and Prestreshi 2003). Additionally, in the most marginalized areas of northern Albania the collapse of the former regime provoked recourse to pre-communist customs. Here, a revitalisation of traditionalist ritual and rhetoric has occasionally produced a fragile order, including the negotiation of local authority and the redistribution of land (although this has mostly benefited particular interest groups at the expense of those who could not claim land rights through descent). Reference to *kanun* here is contested and situational, unpredictable, provoking new conflicts and subject to an abuse of local power which many locals detest and wish to see replaced by the more predictable exertion of state law (Schwandner-Sievers 1999). Lastly, criminal interest groups, often deriving from the most disadvantaged parts of northern Albania and Kosovo, have used 'tradition' to conceal their informal interests and to enforce group cohesion via the threat and usage of violence against those defined as 'traitors', both inside and outside the country (Schwandner-Sievers 2001). In summary, traditionalist rhetoric has gained a social and political life, and Albanian traditions have been invented and revitalised in those niches outsides the state control, where vested interests emerged or where there were few political or economic alternatives available that could prevent *kanun* becoming a resource of identification.

I have described elsewhere how my early research into northern Albanian *kanun* culture shaped my ways of speaking Albanian and thus provoked gales of laughter during my first fieldwork encounters in the south (Schwandner-Sievers 2001: 111). Urban and southern Albanians today assign *kanun* practices to their fellow-nationals in the north, who are occasionally and derogatorily called 'Chechens' or 'Malok' ('those from the mountains'), and who are also conveniently (and often illegitimately) held responsible for crime in the country. The imputedly primitive and backward 'internal other' can thus be differentiated from a 'cultured' self (particularly in the south where the modernist communist partisan project was based),[19] perhaps in compensation for the discrimination experienced by southern labour migrants abroad, mostly in Greece or Italy. However, this internal differentiation is not reflected in western Albanianism. This is exemplified by the German and English trajectories of image construction which I study in the following section, constructions with which any Albanian – urban or rural, northern or southern – may find him- or herself confronted in various arenas of encounter.

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[19] For the significance of 'culture' in southern and urban self-ascription (in the sense of 'education'), see Gilles de Rapper (2002).

'Noble' violence and paternalist empathy

As Maria Todorova has suggested, during the decline of the Ottoman Empire from the late eighteenth century, when the Balkan people entered the Western European imagination as potential nation-states, 'views of the area were colored by romanticism and/or *Realpolitik*, resulting in polarized advocacy or demonization of these populations' (Todorova 1994: 461). The fictitious[20] nineteenth century German travel writer, Karl May (1842-1912), provides a wonderful source of such representational patterns because, as the contemporary German historian and *Albanologist*, Michael Schmidt-Neke (1994), has documented, he synthesised both populist and scholarly views in his novels. At the same time, his writing demonstrated the appearance in Germany of sympathetic representations of the Albanians alongside continued descriptions of violence and revenge killing which had been dominant since the early nineteenth century.

In general, May implicitly denounced all Balkan national movements as criminal and viewed the Porte as the 'sick man of the Bosporus' who needed healing. More specifically, however, the superiority or inferiority of any *Volk* was determined according to a dichotomous distinction between 'rootedness' (which is part of a romantic concept of *Heimat*, 'home') and 'uprootedness' or dislocation. This rooted/uprooted divide was also applied to the Albanians. They were either deemed 'rooted' within their own customs in their homelands (in their *Heimat*), in which case May called them 'Skipetaren', or they were 'rootlessly' dispersed through the empire (separated from their *Heimat*; for example as mercenaries to the Ottoman state), in which case he called them 'Arnauten'. Although the functional roots of these designations are not wrong ('Skipetar' derives from the Albanian self-designation *shqiptar,* while *arnaut* was the Turkish ethnonym for Albanians related to the Greek *arvanitos*, and there were many Albanians in Ottoman service known as *Arnauts*), there is a judgemental symbolism attached which produces stereotypical imagery. In general, dislocated ethnic groups, particularly Jews, Kurds, Roma or Armenians, provide the least sympathetic characters in Karl May's writings (Schmidt-Neke 1994: 272n, author's translations from the German). More precisely, an environmental determinism underpins both designations. The 'Skipetar' in his rough, mountainous *Heimat* displays features such as physical strength, sincerity, courage, group loyalty, suspiciousness (or rather attentiveness), solidarity against the enemy, sometimes hospitality (loyalty to the foreigner), sometimes xenophobia, a will for independence, 'the sight

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[20] The popular Catholic weekly *Deutscher hausschatz* in which Karl May's writings were originally published as a series of travel reports from 1880 until 1888 produced just after the Berlin Congress. This periodical frequently assured its readers that Karl May had actually reported his authentic personal travel adventures and experiences as reported in the first person singular by the main character of the narratives. The texts were later published from 1892 as the *Orientzyklus*. In the last volumes five and six, Karl May explicitly encounters Albanians and Albanian Lands. The six novels in six volumes published by Fehsenfeld, Feiburg im Breigau, are: 1. *Durch die wüste*; 2. *Durchs wilde Kurdistan;* 3. *Von Bagdad nach Stambul*; 4. *In den schluchten des Balkan*; 5. *Durch das land der Skipetaren*; 6. *Der schut*. For biographical details of Karl May, see: http://www.karl-may-stiftung.de/biograph/html (last accessed 5 September 2001).

of an eagle', self-confidence, faithfulness to the given word, proneness to revenge, hatred, irreconcilable but honest anger, and other characteristics. These all mirror popular – albeit national-conservative – German ideals of the noble savage that existed at the time, including the quality of 'legitimate' or 'honourable' violence (Schmidt-Neke 1994: 257; Wiedenroth and Wollschläger 1990: 307). In contrast, the 'Arnauten' display all the features which May loathes and implicitly holds responsible for the decline of the Ottoman Empire. They are corrupt, violent (in the sense of unpredictable cruelty), dirty, poor, ignorant of both state and religious law, open to bribery and prone to alcoholism, theft and murder.

Schmidt-Neke has documented in detail the way that Karl May's stereotypes anticipated a rhetoric of nature and *Heimat*, racial purity, anti-Semitism and heroic *Übermenschentum*, which was later reproduced in German National Socialist encounters with Albanians. In fact, May was favourite childhood reading of Hitler and many *Wehrmachts* officers, and has remained part of the popular canon of German adolescent literature until today. Schmidt-Neke has shown that ideal-type descriptions of Albanian customary law, noble masculinity and warrior's honour underpin German *Wehrmacht* autobiographies[21] from the time of occupation in Kosovo and Albania, when these two regions were united. No wonder that some right-wing nationalist Albanian groups still sympathise with German and Italian fascist forces and still reproduce this favourable image of themselves, particularly when there is violence that requires glorification.

Emerging from a different tradition, British writing on Albania during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century displays a measure of sympathy with the emerging insurgencies against the 'Ottoman Yoke'. There was a sense in which the Balkan nations deserved protection, not least because they were considered to form living museums of classic antiquity. The prominent travel writer, and later anthropologist, Edith Durham (1863-1944), was particularly concerned with Albania as a potential nation. Arguably, it was not only the entertainment value for her turn-of-the century readership that led Durham to explain Albanian and Montenegrin blood feuds in terms of ritual cannibalism, and to tell stories of such 'ancient customs' as biting off the enemy's nose, eating the enemy's heart and head hunting (Durham 1928). Possible romantically charmed by the ritualised and somewhat regulated, archaic 'Balkan violence', Durham also set off to confirm the superiority of the imperial British and their paternal capacity to guide, nurture and protect the less advanced, unfortunate and childlike nations.[22] Perceiving Albanians as threatened by Slav, 'Teuton' and Greek ambitions, and subjected to the fierce violence of local customary laws, she empathises with the locals' requests to bring in the British king and government to assure a strong state, law and order (e.g. Durham 1909 [1987]: 168). Durham was academically affiliated with the Royal Anthropological Institute but also a major and meticulous informant for the Foreign Office, which, at the time, received only amateur intelligence on Albanian lands (Hodgkinson 2001).

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[21] Schmidt-Neke cites various examples, most prominently Walther Peinsipp's *Das volk der Shkypetaren* (1985).
[22] From discussion of Edith Durham's attitudes with Julia Pettifer, March 2003.

As I shall now discuss, the German tendency to glorify 'noble' Albanian violence and the British inclination towards paternalistic empathy with the romanticised 'victim', have both merged in the contemporary period, and can both be traced in international interventionist discourses, in travel writings and in the public responses at home to Albanian migrants and asylum seekers.

Contemporary Albanianism at work

In the early days of post-communist contact between Albania and the West, or of what has been called the transition period, Albanians were imagined as pitiable victims, calling for help and intervention. This was most prominently visualised in an advertisement poster by 'United Colors of Benetton' which used images of Albanians fleeing to Italy:

> The images of the ships packed with Albanian refugees that were going to disembark on Apulia's shores, during the spring and the summer of 1991, went around the world and, better than any political or ideological analysis, were able to convince Western public opinion of the end of one era and of the beginning of another, one perhaps no less dramatic than the previous (Vehbiu and Devole 1996: 7).[23]

In the context of Italy, however, the country which, along with Greece, has been most effected by the mass influx of Albanian migrants, western sympathy quickly evaporated. As Nicola Mai writes:

> If the first Albanians arriving in Italy immediately after the collapse of the communist regime in March 1991 were greeted by local and national media as 'deserving' political refugees, by the end of August of the same year these same people were treated as illegal 'economic migrants', and sent back to Albania after a period of detention in specially prepared camps. Those who remained had to endure media coverage that in large measure contributed to, indeed was responsible for, the pervasive stigmatisation and criminalisation of Albanian migrants, which has persisted and in fact worsened over the past ten years (Mai 2001; see also Zinn 1996).

When TV pictures of Albanian refugees appeared during the 1999 NATO military intervention over Kosovo, the paradigm of the pitiable poor and helpless victim once more superseded that of the displaced, dirty and criminal offender. The usage of media constructions of Albanians to justify the military, or so-called 'humanitarian', intervention in Kosovo has been subject to a number of critical debates, debates which have questioned both the intervention's legitimacy and efficacy (e.g. Buckley 1999; Ali 2000; Siani-Davies 2003). In the case of transitional Albania, Mariella Pandolfi (2002: 211) has similarly linked the two constructions of Albanians – as victims and as potential criminals – to Western self-interest. It is on the basis of constructing Albanian *incapacity* that the 'international humanitarian industry' and 'supra-colonialism' has flourished, with finan-

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[23] I am grateful to Lino Sciarra for this translation.

cial flows to Albania outnumbering any aid or consultancy ever given to an African country by millions of dollars.[24]

Albanian elites, the public and the media have all discovered the political implications of their national image[25] and criticism of Western hegemonic practice is emerging. For example, in early summer 2002 a series of articles in the critical Albanian journal *Shekulli* attacked the continuing OSCE presence in the country. OSCE ambassador Ahrends was accused of promoting the image of 'incapable Albanians' to secure further intervention at the expense of national sovereignty. A seventeen-year old Tirana girl complained, when the country was in disarray in 1997, about the one-sidedness of media representation: 'Why did they never show our student flower demonstrations against crime and violence in the international news?' Indeed, due to the market rules of international media, only spectacular pictures of 'cheaply clothed, and unwashed ruffians running off with stolen sacks of flour or brandishing threatening gestures', or images 'of the ubiquitous ten-year-old wielding a submachine gun while watching over his grazing cow' (Blumi 1998: 532), made it onto the TV screens over the world.

From approximately 1993, numerous French, German, Italian and English documentary makers discovered the exotic value of the re-emergence of *vendetta* killings, prostitution and other informal practices, and were seduced by the *kanun* as an exotic short-cut explanation. Pandolfi described the ways in which such images infiltrated the discourse of those internationals involved in the 'transition-industry' in Albania:

> ... the re-discovery of customary laws that suddenly returned to be enforced in the mountain regions and in the suburbs of Tirana, became the centrepiece of an exotic scenario. This scenario enchanted European law experts who had a passion for 'cultural archaeology' and researchers who invested in cultural heritage and for whom exoticising and folklorising was a professional practice. Thus blinded to the reality before them, ... Albanian customary law became the master template for understanding the emergence of anti-state parallel power structures, the naïve cruelty of financial pyramids, the wide-spread local violence and other criminal activities (Pandolfi 2002: 205).

Travel writing similarly contributed to the image construction of Albanians as exotic strangers in thrall to the *kanun*. Robert Carver's popular travel narrative, *The accursed mountains*, published in 1998, has become favoured reading for many officials of NATO and other international agencies sent to Albania or Kosovo.[26] Carver, working

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[24] From 1990 to the end of 1999, foreign aid transferred through mulitlateral and bilateral institutions to Albania only amounted to more than 2.7 billion USD (see Albanian human development report 2000: 13).
[25] See, for example, an interview with Ismail Kadare (Mara 2001: 1, 10).
[26] In May 2000 I attended a conference on Albania for NATO partners at the invitation of the research department of the European US military intelligence base in Huntington, UK. Here, Clarissa de Waal, of Cambridge University, addressed exactly this issue in a paper called 'Albanians, Kosovars: cultural differences, stereotypes' (unpublished paper to Balkans Intelligence Support Element, US European Command, Joint Analysis Centre, May 2000). Most officials present seemed familiar with Carver's writings.

through a translator only, travelled for two months through the northern mountains where he finds 'the atmosphere of imminent violence and death was palpable, of gunfights, dynamite and blood feuds.' (Carver 1998: 249) Albanians – according to Carver – are still in the 'state of endemic lawlessness described by Edith Durham in 1908' (in whose foot-steps he places himself) and 'there was no knowing how many were killed every week, but it was certainly many hundreds' (p. 252). He claims, in fact, that 'Enver Hoxha was the only man in history who has ever managed to master this unruly and anarchic people' (p. 245). Moreover, since the West has started to attract this 'mass of poor, desperate people ... this beast ... would in time overwhelm us and destroy us in its desire to become like us' (p. 259). Not surprisingly, Carver occasionally produces 'a blank Albanian stare' (p. 291) from his informants when asserting his presumptions (such as the notion that 'the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjin' constitutes 'a profound psychological portrait of contemporary Albania' or that 'the *kanun* represent[s] what Albanians, in their deepest essence, believed was right and wrong' (p. 312). Consequently he suggests to internationals that 'no official should be allowed to negotiate with Albanians, or visit Albania, who has not mastered this quintes-sential code, which lays bare the very soul of an ancient, proud and much misunderstood people' (p. 312).

Paternalising empathy of Carver's kind may suggest that 'the Balkans' and 'the West' still operate within the discursive fields of hegemonic power relations and interests, as the 'Balkanism' debate has identified. For Albania, it may be the case that a complete lack of knowledge, rather than pre-shaped assumptions, about the country predominates in the Western popular imagination. Nevertheless, this still encourages the further con-struction of Albania as a space for imaging, the dark, evil and dangerous (as for example, Joanna Rowling (2000: 292, 568) does in the Harry Potter novels).

Conclusion

Partly in line with the balkanism debate, this essay has documented the legacy and preva-lence of exotic imageries of Albanians, and has suggested that essentialisist representa-tions of Albanians serve structures of exclusion, both at home and abroad. Such 'Albanianism' has been most prominently embodied in *kanun* ascriptions, according to which cultural dispositions govern Albanian violence and victimhood, which in varying historical and contemporary contexts have been subjected to either criminal or romantic interpretations. In implicitly seeking to control the nearness or distance of the exotic in time and space, and thus to control possibly competitive or dangerous 'others', 'culture shifts from something to be described, interpreted, even perhaps explained, …[to being] treated as a source of explanation in itself'(Kuper 2001: x, xi) within changing economic and political contexts.

Albanians thus appear to 'have violent culture'. The short-cut term for this assignment is '*kanun*' in discursive reference to local Albanian, historical customary law. This discursive signifier has, for example, served international agencies positing migrant deviancy as the norm in the Albanian case, rather than seeking more complex, sociological causes, and maintained assumptions of the Albanians' lack of capacity for self-gover-nance (Schwandner-Sievers 2003). Yet *kanun* culture has also served internal Albanian

identity constructions as an argument both in the past and the present, and justified internal economic inequality and local conflict over resource distribution in recent times. Thus, the culturalist constructions that are employed by the West could be shown to equally and historically underpin Albanian nationalism, local patriot agendas and, more-over, criminal interests. Actual migrant perpetrators and victims of violence in conflict with their host countries' laws have recognised, and made use of, the explanatory capac-ity of *kanun* in implicit alliance between native and non-native culturalist 'essentialisions'. Essentialist assumptions are thus mutually asserted and inevitably, international Albanianism experiences a self-fulfilling prophecy.

At the same time, this contribution has aimed to go beyond the balkanism debate by taking into account the subjects of the balkanist imagery themselves and by analysing their practices. It has sought to explore the typical everyday survival strategies of indi-vidual Albanians who in the contemporary European migrant situation are widely faced with the generalised stereotypes of violent culture, and who feel the need to respond to them. Although, these stereotypes seem unrepresentative of majority Albanian attitudes and practices whether within Albania or outside, they carry much responsibility for the impact of Albanianism on individual action and institutional policy. The power of such imagery cannot be ignored, not least because it supports the arguments of particular, often violent Albanian interest groups, while effectively forcing the average, non-violent Albanian, faced with the outside world, into everyday mimicry, self-denial or apology, to mention just a few of the symptoms of Albanianism at work.

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POVZETEK

Prispevek predstavlja načine, s katerimi albanski migranti v različnih evropskih državah s subverzivnimi strategijami in praksami identitetne mimikrije obidejo različne stereotipne predstave, ki jih v teh državah gojijo o albanski kulturi in ljudeh kot še posebej nagnjenih k nasilju. Te vplivne stereotipne predstave, podkategorije balkanizma, ki jih avtorica opredeljuje kot t.i. albanizme, je lahko zaslediti v številnih literarnih delih evropske zgodovine, v sodobni politiki in v Albancem lastnih zgodovinskih predstavah. Raziskava ugotavlja, da je 'albanska nasilnost' ovrednotena različno glede na specifične politične in ekonomske interese–bodisi da jo romantično opevajo kot 'plemenito' ali pa demonizirajo v povezavi s tradicionalnim pravom oz. kanonom (*kanun*) in ideali herojstva, poguma in časti, tako v skupinskih kot individualnih predstavah. V literaturi lahko zasledimo tudi različne skeptične drže (okcidentalistične in orientalistične) in zgodovinske nastavke paternalističnega odnosa tujcev do Albancev in njihovih 'primitivnih' običajev. V zaključku se izkaže, da sodobni albanizmi v povezavi z izključevalno priseljensko politiko koristijo ravno tistim prestopnikom, zaradi katerih dejanj se še danes vzdržujejo posplošena prepričanja o albanski nasilnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: stereotipi, migracije, identitetne strategije, kanon, nasilje.

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