Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo

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This book is not the one I initially intended to write. Due to the events in the former Yugoslavia, the doctoral research that I was conducting in Kosovo in the early 1990s took an unexpected turn. During the autumn of 1992, within a few months after the beginning of my fieldwork in Letnica (a Croat enclave near the border with Macedonia), research was made virtually impossible because most of my subjects became refugees. The turbulent developments in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina triggered off sudden and radical processes of ethnic fermentation, which resulted in the end of the community that I was planning to study. Although at that time there was no war going on in Kosovo, between July and December 1992 more than three quarters of the Croat population of Letnica and surrounding villages decided to abandon their homes and leave their possessions behind. They went to Croatia, where most of them were resettled in Western Slavonia, in empty villages that carried the undeniable marks of war, in houses that had belonged to Serbs.

It is clear that these events greatly affected my research. I was forced to abandon my original research: the community was in a process of complete turmoil, and doing fieldwork there, under those conditions, was becoming more and more dangerous and questionable (from the practical as well as the ethical viewpoint). The present book is in many ways an attempt to pick up the pieces, the debris that the Yugoslav wars left behind in the minds and lives of ordinary people, but also in my own work. The book clearly bears the marks of the vicissitudes of my research: since I was unable to produce the anthropological monograph that I planned to write when I started my research, I decided to compile papers that I worked on during the years of my involvement with the area (beginning with my MA thesis written in 1989). It has grown into a collection of ethnographic case studies on Kosovo, all dealing with subjects that at some stage have caught my interest. My choice of topics has been rather led by intuition than by any clear preconceived concept, yet all case studies share certain themes and ways of approach. Although the focus is on Kosovo, the scope is much wider, covering developments in Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia. The rationale behind this is that it is
almost impossible to understand developments in Kosovo without discussing them in a larger Balkan context.

The chapters that are included in this dissertation can be read separately, as they describe different, usually local, arenas and contexts. They are all meant as separate case studies, in which the emphasis is on the historical and ethnographic detail. All chapters deal, however, with themes that are interconnected, and each exhibits a general interest in the tension between conflict and symbiosis in this part of Europe, and the role religion plays in the local, regional and national politics of identity. The themes revolve upon the ways identities are formed and transformed, as a result of wider political developments, and how religion and ritual help, on the one hand, in establishing forms of community across ethno-religious boundaries, and on the other hand, in creating divisions, drawing borders and delineating (ethnic) identities. In spite of all the variety, these seven chapters share certain theoretical assumptions which I have tried to sketch out in the introduction. In my conclusions I will try to transcend the particularity of these case studies, and sum up my findings in more general terms.

Some of the chapters included here have been published previously in some form. Although most of them been revised and rewritten considerably, they still reflect the development of my thinking. In my latest work approach and style are probably more mature than in my oldest chapters (2 and 4) which were written before the start of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Chapter 1 was first published in Croatian (Egzodus iz Letnice. Hrvatske izbjeglice sa Kosova u Zapadnoj Slavoniji. Kronika. In: Narodna umjetnost (Zagreb), 32/2, 1995, pp.129-152) and then in English (The exodus of Letnica. Croatian refugees from Kosovo in Western Slavonia. A chronicle. In: Renata Jambresic Kirin & Maja Povrzanovic (eds.), War, exile, everyday life. Cultural perspectives. Zagreb: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 1996, pp.147-170). Chapter 2 was first published in Dutch (Van het rechte pad geraakt. Gezamenlijke pelgrimages van moslims en christenen in Joegoslavië en Albanië. In: Willy Jansen & Huub de Jonge (red.), Islamitische pelgrimstochten. Muiderberg: Coutinho, 1991, pp.113-126) and then in English (Pilgrimage, politics and ethnicity. Joint pilgrimages of Muslims and Christians and conflicts over ambiguous sanctuaries in Yugoslavia and Albania. In: Mart Bax & Adrianus Koster (eds.), Power and prayer. Religious and political processes in past and present. Amsterdam:VU University Press, 1993, pp.79-
This chapter has been revised and expanded considerably. Chapter 4 is based on my MA thesis (*Derwisten in Joegoslavië. Religious nonconformisme onder Albanese moslems in Kosovo*). ICSA, University of Nijmegen, 1989), and was subsequently presented as a conference paper (Islam and ethnicity. Dervish brotherhoods in Kosovo. Presented at the conference *The anthropology of ethnicity - A critical review*, Amsterdam, 15-19 December 1993. Workshop V: Ethnicity, language and religion, pp.53-62). This chapter has also been revised considerably. Chapter 5 was first published in Dutch (De Egyptenaren in Kosovo en Macedonie. In: *Amsterdams sociologisch tijdschrift*, 18, 1992, pp.24-38) and then in an updated English version which is almost identical to the one in this book (The making of Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia. In: Cora Govers & Hans Vermeulen (eds.), *The politics of ethnic consciousness*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, pp.194-222); recently this paper was also published in Serbian (Egipčani na Kosovu i u Makedoniji. In: *Filozofija i društvo*, 14, 1998, pp.119-146). Chapters 3, 6 and 7, as well as the introduction and conclusion, have not been published before.

There are many people and institutions which were very helpful during the subsequent stages of my research. It is impossible to thank them all, but I nevertheless would like to mention a few: first I would like to thank the Roman-Catholic Charity *Church in Need* who at the initial stage of my doctoral research enabled me to start with my fieldwork in ‘mixed’ pilgrimages sites in Kosovo during the summers of 1990 and 1991. The *Amsterdam School of Social Science Research* financed most of my subsequent research, and I would like to thank both staff and students of the School for offering me a stimulating environment. Throughout the years, I have also benefited from regular meetings with a group of fellow anthropologists, Karin Bijker, Gerard Hersbach, Dina Siegel and Sjef Vissers, all of them involved with research on pilgrimage. Most chapters have been scrutinised separately by experts on the specific issues that are dealt with, and for comments and suggestions I am grateful to Peter Bartl, Xavier Bougarel, Wendy Bracewell, Nathalie Clayer, Robert Elsie, Victor Friedman, René Grémaux, Willy Jansen, Anastasija Karakasidou, Denisa Kostović, Aleksandar Lopasic, Noel Malcolm, Christos Mylonas, Alexandar Popović, Mattijs van de Port, Maria Todorova, and Mitja Velikonja. Wendy Bracewell has offered invaluable help in correcting the English. I am also grateful to the *School of Slavonic
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Postscript

This manuscript was finalised before the start of NATO actions against Serbia, and the events that have followed in Kosovo and Serbia in recent weeks. Although these developments have put my work in a completely different light, I have been unable to include them in my account. It is sad that this book now bears testimony to a world that has ceased to exist (Ger Duijzings, April 1999).