Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo
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Citation for published version (APA):

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo is an area which has become known as an example of a conflict-ridden and segregated society, in which Albanians and Serbs live completely divided in two ‘parallel’ societies. The region is often seen as a kind of frontier where —since the famous Battle of Kosovo fought between the Ottoman Turks and Balkan Christian forces (1389)— Muslims and Christians have met and clashed. In the 1980s, these divisions have turned the province into one of the most dangerous hotspots of Eastern Europe. Since the end of the war in Bosnia, and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (in November 1995), the situation in Kosovo has escalated, especially since the Albanians have started a guerrilla war after years of political stalemate. Against the light of these recent developments it is logical that the rift between Albanians and Serbs is perceived as a hard and fast line of division. Yet, Kosovo has also a history of coexistence, with considerable movement across this ethnic and religious frontier, through trade, cultural diffusion, religious exchange and conversion. Many cultural traits were and still are shared across group boundaries, and throughout history the ethnic and religious barriers have been anything but watertight. Instead of two ‘ethnic’ societies, I prefer to speak here of one single ‘frontier’ society, in which periods of confrontation alternate with periods of contact and co-operation across ethnic and religious boundaries. Although the war in Kosovo may cause us to think in terms of irreconcilable differences, one should not forget that boundaries —the territorial as well as the cognitive ones— have often faded in more quiet periods. Everyday realities in small communities, which are usually the working field of the anthropologist, suggest that in a distant and not so distant past things have sometimes — though certainly not always — been quite different.

This tension between conflict and symbiosis, particularly in the field of religious life, is one of the main themes of this book. Since 1991, I have done research on ethnically and religiously ‘mixed’ pilgrimages in Kosovo (in such places as the Serbian-Orthodox monasteries of Gračanica and Zočište and the Roman Catholic shrine of Letnica), which offer good examples
of this contact across religious and ethnic boundaries. At present this seems unimaginable, but Muslims and Christians of different ethnic backgrounds have visited each other’s sanctuaries, worshipped each other’s saints and ignored the evident theological objections of religious orthodoxies. Ethnographic studies of the area show that ethno-religious border-crossing and syncretism have been widespread (see especially F.W. Hasluck 1929). Particularly in the field of popular religion, which religious authorities traditionally control least, formal boundaries are disregarded most often (Badone 1990). There are numerous examples in Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia, where Muslim and Christian forms of pilgrimage and saint veneration have amalgamated and formal religious divisions have become blurred (see chapter 2).

Though ethno-religious differences need not to be an impediment to a certain degree of communitas (Turner 1974), it is not always harmony and tolerance that reigns in these places. Communitas is a highly precarious matter which, under certain political conditions, can turn into

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1 I already started to do research in Kosovo in 1986. As a student, I studied the revival of popular Sufism among Albanians. This resulted in my MA thesis (1989) which has been the basis for chapter 4 of the present book.

2 I am aware of the present scepticism about using the term syncretism. It is defined here as the process of religious synthesis, of hybridisation and ‘mixing’, that occurs at the interface of different religious formations. It refers to practices that are not sanctioned by the church, i.e. institutionalised and backed up by forms of ecclesiastic power and authority (Badone 1990; Stewart & Shaw 1994). However, what is syncretic at one point in time may become part of religious orthodoxy later. Orthodoxy (and orthopraxy) are thus always situationally defined, and linked to relationships of dominance and authority (Eickelman 1989:287). For ethnographic accounts of syncretism in the Balkans see: Dawkins (1933), Barjaktarović (1950), Skendi (1967), Bartl (1967), and Bartl (1968:87-98).

3 Victor and Edith Turner’s claim that “[w]ith rare and interesting exceptions, pilgrims of the different historical religions do not visit one another’s shrines, and certainly do not find salvation extra ecclesia” (Turner & Turner 1978:9) does not seem to hold true for the Balkans and probably also for many other parts of the world (see for instance Ben-Ami 1990; Oberoi 1994; van de Veer 1994:33-43; Tambiah 1986:62-63). Famous shrines of one particular religion are often visited by members of other faiths as well. Let me just give the example of Lourdes in France, the most famous Roman Catholic shrine in Europe, which has also attracted Muslims from Bosnia (Oršolić 1978).
precisely the opposite. This shift from relative symbiosis to conflict I experienced most drastically during the research I did in Letnica, a Catholic and Croat enclave in Kosovo. In Kosovo and beyond, it is a well-known 'ecumenical' Marian shrine, visited by thousands of pilgrims, not only by local Catholics (Croats and Albanians), but also by members of other groups living in the region (Muslim Albanians, Orthodox Serbs, and Gypsies). Relations between these groups were the focal point of my research, and I was primarily interested in the role ritual plays in the formation and delineation of ethno-religious identities. I viewed the pilgrimage as a laboratory of identity, where one can see both these dimensions of ethno-religious conflict and symbiosis, of fission and fusion, 'at work'. Letnica was a fascinating place to do this research, because the municipality of which it is part has always been one of the most heterogeneous in Kosovo. The area forms an ethnic and religious micro-cosmos, consisting of a complicated patchwork of groups (Muslim and Catholic Albanians, Albanian crypto-Catholics, Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Gypsies).

In the summer of 1991 (when I first visited Letnica to observe the pilgrimage), the war which just had started in Croatia was already throwing its shadow on the 'ecumenical' character of this event: tensions between local Croats and Serbs were mounting, pilgrims did not come in those huge numbers of former days and went home much earlier, Serbs from neighbouring villages were boycotting the shrine, and other pilgrims seemed not to enjoy themselves as fully as in previous years, feeling vaguely insecure and made anxious by the war that was raging a few hundred miles to the north. Somehow, war was in the air in these parts as well, and many felt that it was unsafe to spend the night outside as pilgrims usually do. As far as my research was concerned, I initially did not feel too discouraged by these rising tensions; after all, I had anticipated them, asking questions such as: How does the deterioration of ethno-religious relations affect the 'ecumenical' or mixed character of this pilgrimage? Do people of different ethnic and religious background still gather in relative harmony, or is the shrine transformed into an arena in which ethno-religious boundaries are increasingly marked off and dramatised? And to what extent do shrines become the focal point of
ethno-political mobilisation and competition? Yet I did not expect relations between local Serbs and Croats, which had never been burdened with historical antagonism, to deteriorate so rapidly. The end of this story was that within a few months—while I was doing fieldwork—the vast majority of the Croat inhabitants of Letnica fled to Croatia (see chapter 1). This Croat village, which I thought was too remote and isolated to be affected by an eventual escalation of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians, did not offer the calm and peaceful environment—almost a *sine qua non* of normal anthropological research⁵—which I had expected.

Kosovo as an ethnic shatter zone

As I have pointed out earlier, due to these developments I was forced to change my plans, and I decided to transform my doctoral thesis from a local monograph into a compilation of loosely connected ethnographic case studies that go beyond the confines of village society. Before I turn to the case studies, I would like to provide a short ethnographic and historical sketch of the area, in which I will try to pinpoint a number of features which I think are central to this society. In addition, I would like to offer a general theoretical framework, which will link all these case studies together.

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⁴ These questions were mainly inspired by the work of Sallnow (1981 & 1987), Bax (1987), and Eade & Sallnow (1991). For a similar view on pilgrimage as both a vehicle for social integration and a source of conflict, see Bax (1995).

⁵ Historically, modern anthropology and its methods (fieldwork, participant observation) have largely developed in colonial contexts, where anthropologists did their research in the relatively pacified conditions that were created by the colonial state. It is only after the end of colonialism that anthropologists have become more aware of the historicity of the societies they study (cf. Blok 1977; Cole 1977; Marcus & Fischer 1986). As a result anthropological methods have broadened in order to include these elements of change and process (for instance through archival research), although I think that common anthropological training still does not equip anthropologists well enough for research in situations of profound and violent change. It is only in the last decade or so that anthropologists have started to work under such conditions. See for instance Nordstrom & Robben (1995).
Kosovo is an example of a poor, peripheral and conflict-ridden society, where the central authority of the state has been nominal for much of its modern history. Like most other Balkan areas which were part of ‘Turkey in Europe’ until the very end of Ottoman rule (1912), it is an area with an undeveloped economy. The French social geographer Marcel Roux, who has produced one of the very few serious studies on Kosovo, has called it the Third World within Europe, “véritable périphérie de la périphérie” (Roux 1992:238). For its majority rural population life commonly means a struggle for survival: the average Albanian (and Serb) peasant tries to make a living out of a small plot of land, aiming to ensure some minimal level of subsistence, and sending sons away (often abroad) to supplement the meagre income of the household. Since life conditions are harsh and highly competitive, the extended family provides not only a kind of safety net (as is the case in Western Europe), it is also the major source of group solidarity and the primary defensive-and-attack unit, strictly organised along corporate and patriarchal lines.

These are conditions not unfamiliar in many other parts of the Balkans. One can find various features which match the conditions of existential insecurity that have reigned elsewhere: a strong fixation on the family or lineage, distrust towards those who are not one’s kin, a strong pressure to protect the family’s integrity and to avenge infringements upon its reputation, a tendency to conceal information or to mislead or deceive others, which corresponds to an instrumental view of relations outside the family. In this type of atomised society, in which the struggle for survival dominates life and violent conflict is a recurring phenomenon, loyalties beyond the own family are highly unstable, changeable and fluid. In Kosovo, blood feuds

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6 In 1987 the BNP in Kosovo was on the level of Ivory Coast and Honduras (Roux 1992:299). For an analysis of Kosovo’s longstanding social and economic problems see also Büschenfeld (1991).

7 For ethnographic accounts see for instance Dinko Tomasic (1948) and Juliet du Boulay (1976). I realise that I might be reinforcing a rather simplified and stereotypical image of the Balkans (see Todorova 1997a), but I would like to stress that I strongly oppose the view that these elements of poverty, violence and existential insecurity
between Albanian clans were only halted—as recent years have shown—after an external (Serbian) threat became serious. It is clear that lack of social and economic integration has inhibited the development of stable wider identifications.

In Kosovo, the final period of Ottoman rule was marked by chronic disorder: violent rebellions of Albanians against the Ottomans were followed by equally violent reprisals of the Turkish forces. The Christian (particularly Serbian Orthodox) populace in villages suffered most from the lack of protection and the constant abuse by unruly (mostly Muslim Albanian) elements. Kosovo became a frontier region, contested between the Ottoman Empire and independent Serbia. The border between these two states was established earlier, during the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and this resulted in large population movements and a considerable rise of ethnic and religious tensions: Serbs massively expelled Albanians from Serbia to Kosovo, while many Kosovo Serbs fled to Serbia as a result of that. For the first time in Kosovo’s history, a clear ethnic divide emerged between the Albanians, the majority population, and the Serbs, who laid claims on Kosovo’s territory as the cradle of the medieval Serbian empire.

During the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), Kosovo was conquered and incorporated into Serbia, albeit without losing its frontier characteristics. During the long-awaited ‘liberation’ of Kosovo by the Serbian army, it was the Albanians’ turn to become the prime victims, which should be seen as the fixed and unchangeable facts of Balkan life. I would like to advocate an approach which tries to contextualise and historicise these elements, through anthropological, sociological, and historical analysis.


See for instance Durham (1904) for an account of the dismal situation of insecurity, oppression and desperate poverty in Kosovo at the turn of the century. It is not my intention to offer a complete picture of Kosovo’s history here. This has been done in two recent publications: Malcolm (1998) and Vickers (1998). As an introduction into Kosovo’s troubled past (and present), one can also read a book I co-edited (Duijzings, Janjić & Maliqi 1997). This collection of articles includes Serbian and Albanian viewpoints on the Kosovo issue.
contributed much to a further deterioration of relations. The Albanians remained openly antagonistic towards Serbia (and later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), which transformed Kosovo into a colony administered from above. Serbia regarded political and cultural hegemony in Kosovo as an inalienable and sacrosanct Serbian right, and treated the Albanians as a hostile element that needed to be pacified and neutralised, or even expelled. In short, these years between 1878 and 1914 were crucial for Kosovo’s recent history, turning the division between Christians and Muslims into an ethnic divide between Serbs and Albanians (Malcolm 1998:XXIX).

What predominates now in the minds of most Serbs and Albanians, as well as of most outside observers, is the image of a deeply rooted and unbridgeable rift between Serbs and Albanians, more ‘ancient’ and clear-cut than the divisions in Bosnia. This ethnic frontier between Slavs and (Non-Slav) Albanians is reinforced by the old religious gap that divides them, which makes this image indeed compelling. As Noel Malcolm, author of two recent histories of both Bosnia and Kosovo, has noted: “At first sight this looks much more like a genuine ‘ethnic’ conflict. The basic division is, in the first place, an ethnic one in the full sense. (...) Serbs and Albanians are linguistically quite separate. Together with the differentiation in language goes a range of other cultural differences, many of them linked to religion. (...) With both language and religion setting people apart, all the conditions seem to be present for a primary conflict of peoples” (1998:XXVII). Yet the author rightly points out (and illustrates throughout his work) that the characterisation of Kosovo’s history in terms of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’ is grossly misleading; many individual Serbs and Albanians nevertheless now fully endorse this type of thinking.

Mainstream Serbian historiography claims that since the Battle of Kosovo (1389), Serbs have suffered centuries of oppression by a Muslim empire, and have fought a never-ending battle for the resurrection of their great medieval empire. The Kosovo myth still sets the tone in most Serbian historiography, in which Serb suffering and martyrdom, and conflict and incompatibility of Islam and Christianity is stressed (see chapter 7). Most contemporary Serbian historiography, notably the books written by respected scholars like Djoko Slijepčević (1983), Dimitrije
Bogdanović (1986), and Dušan Bataković (1992), provide an image of inherently conflictual relations, especially after Albanians adopted Islam. In similar vein, most Albanians, among them some historians and intellectuals of great reputation, like Skënder Rizaj (1992), Ismail Kadare (1994), and Rexhep Qosja (1995), draw a similar picture of continuous Albanian anguish under Serbian hands. The Serbs are alleged to have an almost genetically predisposed, and thus immutable racist and violent attitude towards Albanians. Kosovo is referred to as the ‘ethnic territory’ of the Albanians which has been occupied by the Serbs. The claim that Albanians constitute (“more than”) 90% of Kosovo’s population, which is being replicated in most Western publications, serves to underline this assumption, although this percentage is most probably too high.

If we adopt a long-term perspective, we do not need to go far back into history to see that Kosovo was essentially a pluriform society, where various ethnic groups coexisted, where many languages were spoken and where all major religions of the Balkans were represented. Although the Albanians have formed an absolute majority probably from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards (Malcolm 1998:196), Serbs and Montenegrins, as well as other groups like Gypsies and Turks, have formed substantial minorities, even during most of this century. Therefore, instead of perceiving Kosovo as Albanian ‘ethnic’ territory, I rather prefer to see it historically as an ethnic shatter zone, largely the product of incorporation into the Ottoman state, which embraced and preserved a great variety of ethnic and religious groups (Cole 1981:116-17).

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10 This percentage does not take into account the fact that during some of the post-war censuses minorities like Gypsies, Muslim Slavs and Turks have tended to declare themselves as Albanians for reasons which I will explain later (see Chapter 5). I would like to stress that in my view a smaller and more accurate percentage of Albanians (let us say 85%) basically does not undermine the legitimacy of the Albanian demands in Kosovo. It just signals that the area is demographically not exclusively ‘Albanian’: it is inhabited by other groups as well which deserve to be taken into account.

11 According to the census of 1961, 67% of Kosovo’s population was Albanian, while 27.5% was Serb and Montenegrins and 5.4% was registered as Turks, Muslims, Gypsies, etc. In 1981 the percentages were respectively 77.4%, 14.9% and 7.7% (Krstić 1994: 267-268).
Although, at first sight, Kosovo is perhaps less of an ethno-religious patchwork than pre-war Bosnia, its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity has been more profound. In Bosnia, Serbs, Croats and Muslims speak basically the same language (religion being the main marker of distinction), whereas in Kosovo Albanians and Serbs—or for that matter Turks and Gypsies—all speak different languages. In addition, among Albanians there is a threefold religious divide into Muslims, Catholics, and a substantial community of Shi’a oriented dervish orders, whereas Serbs are Orthodox.

As Roux has noted, before the war started, only half (or even less) of the territory of former Yugoslavia was ethnically homogeneous. Except for Serbia (without the ‘autonomous’ provinces Kosovo and Vojvodina) and Slovenia, which were the two largest chunks of ethnically homogeneous territory, most other parts of former Yugoslavia had a composite population. Bosnia and Vojvodina were probably the most heterogeneous, followed by Macedonia, Kosovo and Croatia. This did not mean that these areas could be characterised as ‘melting pots’. Roux points out that the element of mixture often only applied to the level of the region as a whole: the habitat and ‘lived spaces’ (‘espaces vécus’) of different ethnic groups, however, were always quite separate and segregated, especially at the village level. In most general terms, one can see a pattern of juxtaposition in rural areas—ethnically ‘pure’ villages forming an absolute majority—whereas mixture is more characteristic for the towns. But even in towns, ethnic groups are concentrated in particular quarters (mahale). For instance in Kosovo Serbs and especially Montenegrins usually live in the town centres, whereas the new suburbs of towns are dominated by Albanians mainly as a result of recent rural-urban migration. Therefore, the process of the gradual Albanianization of Kosovo since the 1960s applies more to the rural and suburban areas than the town centres (Roux 1992:129-137).

Although I do acknowledge that Kosovo is a segregated society riven with conflict, I would nevertheless like to challenge the assumptions that in Kosovo 1. only conflict counts, 2.

12 Since the publication of Glazer & Moynihan’s Beyond the Melting-pot (1963) it has become quite dubious to make claims to that extent for any society.
conflicts have always evolved around ethnic categories, and 3. ethno-religious categories are bounded and clear. Instead, in a frontier area like Kosovo it is not conflict or coexistence that is the hallmark of society; both elements have a history in Serb-Albanian relations combining in a variety of ways over time. If we accept that in periods of relative peace ethnic relations may carry an element of strife (if only to mark difference), we also should look for signs of co-operation and cross-cutting loyalties in times of conflict. Ethno-religious relations, whether characterised as peaceful or conflictual, are usually much more multifaceted and subtle than these dichotomous labels suggest. This is especially true for peripheral and frontier societies, which are usually characterised as more conflictual: they are governed by different sets of rules as far as processes of identification is concerned than most ethnic core societies.

To start with the first, although Kosovo is a society marked by perennial conflict, I want to stress that we should be cautious with focusing exclusively on conflict and separateness, because we might be ignoring signs of coexistence and symbiosis. As the predominant image of the Balkans is now one of conflict, I will see it as my main task to demonstrate that boundaries between ethnic and religious groups have often faded in more quiet periods, and that many cultural traits were and still are frequently shared across group boundaries. Despite conflict, there has been intimate and varied contact. The classic study of Serb-Albanian ‘osmosis’ is probably Milan Šufflay’s book Srbi i Arbanasi (1925), which offers an interesting historical perspective on Serb-Albanian relations. Malcolm also stresses that for instance in Montenegro and Northern Albania, relations between Albanians and Serbs were far from only conflictual: “The Montenegrin Brdjani (Highlanders) and the Albanian Malësori share many characteristics —customs, traditional laws and forms of social organisation. In past centuries, there were strong links between Albanian and Montenegrin clans, some were longstanding allies in war, others had traditions of each taking brides from the other clan, and some had legends of common ancestry. Long-term patterns of what might be called ethnic osmosis took place: some of the Montenegrin

13 A telling example is offered by the ethno-musicologist Svanibor Pettan, who shows how the various musical traditions and practices of ethno-religious groups in Kosovo are intertwined (Pettan 1997; see also Pettan 1992).
clans may originally have been off-shoots from Albanian families, and some of the Albanian ones may have Slav ancestry too” (Malcolm 1998:10). Although the situation in Kosovo seems to be more clear-cut (Grémaux 1997), also there we should be cautious about analysing social life only in terms of conflict and division.

Other studies of frontier societies have emphasised these aspects of symbiosis and contact. Henk Driessen, in his stimulating study of Melilla, the Spanish enclave in northern Africa (Morocco), stresses that periods of confrontation alternate with periods of intense contact and co-operation across boundaries. Interestingly, Driessen also points at the wide gap that exists between the central state ideology and frontier practice. State and religious centres always emphasise the fixity and impenetrability of the barrier which is largely cast in religious terms, and they do much to maintain this ideological divide. But in daily life the frontier is a zone of interaction and interchange rather than division (Driessen 1992:190). Another example is Wendy Bracewell’s study of the sixteenth century Habsburg-Ottoman frontier, which demonstrates the complexity of frontier societies, where loyalties cross religious and imperial boundaries. Bracewell also points at the discrepancies between frontier practice, where people of both sides often co-operate and communicate, and the attempts of the state to create clear-cut divisions: “In spite of the bloody combats and confrontations between Christian and Muslim, conflict was not the only element that shaped border life. More peaceful activities brought the two worlds together. (...) Where there was daily contact, acquaintance and friendship could follow, despite the watchful eyes of church and civil authorities” (Bracewell 1992:33).

Secondly, I would like to stress that, in Kosovo, ethnic divisions have not always been the most salient ones. Much of the conflict and tension that permeates Kosovo society has evolved along other lines of division than the ethnic ones. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the main lines of division were between Albanian landlords and the rest of the population, and all groups suffered greatly from the conditions of existential insecurity and

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14 For a recent (and excellent) theoretical survey of the anthropological study of borders, borderlands and frontiers see: Wilson & Donnan (1998).
violence, regardless of their ethnic or religious background (Malcolm 1998:182-83). Also other divisions have been much more salient in daily life and local contexts than the ethnic one: those on the basis of clan or tribal loyalties, religion, the urban versus rural dichotomy, language (which is not always coterminous with ethnic divisions) or gender. One may include here as well political or ideological divisions, for instance between communists and ‘counter-revolutionaries’, which poisoned much of political life in Kosovo in the 1980s. It is worth noting that in this period most Albanian ‘irredentists’ were sentenced and jailed by fellow Albanians, and not by Serbs (Jansen 1997).

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, group identities are not set in stone. I would like to challenge the idea that explosions of violence in crisis zones like Kosovo or Bosnia evolve around clear-cut, fixed, and bounded ethnic groups, and that the recent wars were caused by centuries-old antagonisms dormant under socialism. When we take a closer look at what happens on the ground, over a prolonged period of time, then we see that identity, at least at the local level, shows many ambiguities in areas like Kosovo, Macedonia, and Bosnia. Contact between different groups (such as between Serbs and Albanians) has been marked by cases of reciprocal assimilation and (incomplete) conversion. If we look at the effects of Islamicization, which has been the major direction of religious conversion in the region, we often see that the Christian element is retained and Christian features (like baptism, the veneration of saints, and the use of icons) coexist with Muslim ones.15 Also in the case of ethnic assimilation, previously used languages are perpetuated, sometimes for a considerable period.16 My research also shows that ethnic and religious identities are not as fixed as our experience in Western Europe suggests. One can have more than one ‘exclusive’ identity, and one can change identity more easily and more drastically. In addition, frequent migrations throughout the region have greatly contributed to a blurring of ethnic and confessional boundaries. It shows that in these circumstances of flux and

15 See for instance Vryonis (1972). Until recently, one could still find bi-confessional extended Albanian families in Kosovo, some members being Catholics and others Muslims (Barjaktarović 1950).

16 The Slavophone Albanians in Orahovac are a good example of this phenomenon (see chapter 2).
existential insecurity, identities are often unstable and weakly defined, and that shifts or transfers in identity occur frequently. In ethnic ‘core’ zones, where the centres of power are located (such as central Serbia), identities have been more firmly established. In these areas the state has had a more enduring presence, and therefore the scope for manipulation is less.

There are historical antecedents to this situation of unstable and shifting identifications: for many centuries the Balkans have formed the frontier between East and West, initially divided between the Western Roman Empire and Byzantium (395), which was later reinforced by the schism between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic church (1054). For most of the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church and Eastern Orthodox churches tried to gain influence at the expense of the other, and in areas like Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, and even Montenegro and Serbia, ecclesiastics and aristocrats exploited this situation by shifting their allegiances from Constantinople to Rome and vice versa (along with their subjects). This situation of religious rivalry and shifting loyalties was even exacerbated with the arrival of a third major religion, Islam. Islamicization especially affected those borderlands between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic church. After that, the Balkans remained a battlefield for competing churches, which tried to enhance their influence or win back souls that were once lost to a rival (see chapter 3).

Conversion (and reconversion) has been quite a normal process, especially in areas where church infrastructure was weakly developed. In areas where a stable ecclesiastical organisation was absent (as in Bosnia and Albania), populations easily switched from one rite to the other. In such conversion processes, usually both pull and push-factors played a role; it was rarely imposed by violent means only, although this also happened. Yet there were considerable

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17 For Albania, see for instance Skendi (1956). In Bosnia this situation resulted in the creation of a separate Bosnian church (Fine 1975).

18 There is a huge literature on the process of Islamicization in the Balkans. For recent and concise overviews see Lopasic (1994) and other contributions to the special issue of the Journal of Islamic studies, 5(2), 1994. See also the collection of articles in Panzac (1992).
variations in the relative importance of those two elements. If we confine ourselves again to the process of Islamicization, in Bosnia a substantial part of the population converted to Islam soon after the local aristocracy did, more or less on a voluntarily basis and attracted by the splendour of a growing and magnificent empire. In Albania and Kosovo, however, Islamicization remained largely confined to the towns, while leaving the countryside untouched for a long time to go. The rural populations (especially in mountainous areas) converted later, in the seventeenth century, when the wars between the Ottoman empire and the Christian powers became more frequent, and Ottoman persecution of Christians (especially Roman Catholics) led to waves of forced Islamicization. Nonetheless, or rather because of this, Islamicization went further than in Bosnia, eventually encompassing seventy percent of all Albanians.

However, because in Albania and Kosovo Islam was imposed in a much more violent manner, most converts were only nominally Muslims. Here, syncretism and heterodoxy were much more widespread than in Bosnia, where an influential school of ulema and a much denser religious infrastructure ensured a higher degree of orthodoxy. In Albania and Kosovo, converts only fully Islamicized after several generations. Women, traditionally confined to the private domain, continued to foster Catholic customs and beliefs, while the men (in keeping up an acceptable public face) tended to embrace the new faith more easily (Skendi 1956:315-316). In some remote and inaccessible mountain areas ambiguous religious identifications and practices have continued to exist until the present day.

People have changed their ethnic identity or converted to another religion without completely abandoning and forgetting the legacy of previous identities. Because of these historical experiences of conversion and ‘mimicry’ (the outward adoption of an identity for the sake of survival), and the consciousness of mixed and composite origins, there is often a high awareness among Balkan inhabitants that most identities should not be taken for granted: they are often regarded as ‘guises’ or ‘constructs’ that may be accepted or rejected. The phenomenon

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19 Since the Orthodox were less subject to Ottoman persecution, Albanian Catholics sometimes converted to Orthodoxy as well, for instance in Montenegro (Bartl 1968:31).
of contesting the identities of others is widespread, and is even part of the political game. Here, I will just take Kosovo as an example.\(^{20}\) Albanians claim that many Serbs are ‘really’ Albanians by origin, who during the Serbian Empire were converted to Orthodoxy and were Serbianized thereafter. Historical sources indeed suggest that Albanians adopted Serbian names, especially in villages that were part of the estates of a Serbian monastery. Being part of this social, economic, and religious environment probably encouraged a closer identification with Serbian Orthodoxy, and as Malcolm has pointed out, on the basis of this, “Albanian historians have suggested that many of the bearers of those Serbian Orthodox names were actually Albanians, a hidden ethnic mass whose re-emergence in the early Ottoman period explains an otherwise puzzling ‘Albanianization’ of the area” (Malcolm 1998:55-56). The Serbian answer to these claims is that many Albanians are ‘really’ Serbs, and there seems to be some historical truth to that as well: in Kosovo the process of Albanianization, i.e. the continuous migration of Albanians from the tribal areas of northern Albania into Kosovo, coincided with the process of Islamicization. The great majority of Albanians converted to Islam in the course of this process. Also many Serbs converted, subsequently adopting Albanian, the dominant language of their environment. These

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\(^{20}\)One can easily expand this list looking at other areas of the Balkans. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a whole series of contesting claims have been made. Croats have been labelled ‘Catholic Serbs’ by Serbs, and Serbs ‘Orthodox Croats’ by Croats. Many Serbs and Croats regard the Bosnian Muslims as an ‘artificial’ creation, as a phantom nation \textit{tout court}, claiming them to be either ‘Islamicized’ Serbs or Croats. Many Montenegrins consider themselves to be a separate nation, while most Serbs (and also some Montenegrins themselves) see them as fellow Serbs. Identity in Macedonia is probably most liable to contestation, because its population is one of the most mixed and amorphous in the Balkans, and because state structures demanding and facilitating homogeneous identities are only in place recently. Serbs claim that the Macedonians are southern Serbs, Bulgarians that they are western Bulgarians, and Greeks that they are northern Greeks (Mojzes 1995:15). See also Poulton (1995).
processes of Islamicization and Albanianization were still in full swing in the nineteenth century. Supported by this evidence, Serb historians, geographers and ethnographers developed the Arnautasi thesis, claiming that many Albanians are ‘really’ Serbs by origin, a point of view which enjoyed great support among Serbian scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and thereafter. Jovan Tomitch (1913) is one of the main examples: his idea was that the so-called Great Exodus of Serbs from Kosovo in 1690 had actually not been so massive as most Serbian historians believe: instead the destruction of Serbian ecclesiastical structure in the second half of the eighteenth century had resulted in a process of Islamicization and Albanianization of Serbs. Although the assumptions were plausible in themselves, they were abused politically, as Roux notes, since they were made subordinate to a nationalist agenda. The aim was to undermine Albanian ethnic identification, i.e. to ‘de-Albanianize’ as many people as possible and to make ‘Serbs’ of them, which of course was intimately linked with Serbian territorial claims on Kosovo. At the end of the Ottoman reign, areas like Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Bosnia were a ‘territoire a prendre’ for the several neighbouring states (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece).

One element that accompanied these projects to claim and re-claim the identity of certain populations was the idea that forms of ethnic engineering is practicable. Many Balkan nation-state builders believed that it is possible to make or break identities of others, to shift the ethnic

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21 Some compact and isolated Slav settlements, however, adopted Islam without losing their mother tongue, like the Muslims from Sredačka Župa and Gora (both near Prizren). It is said that the people from Gora converted to Islam in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul started to appoint Greek-speaking priests to Serbian villages after the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć was abolished in 1766 (Malcolm 1998:195; see also Lutovac 1955; Kanitz 1888:39-40). Similar processes took place in (Western) Macedonia. Also here, part of the Slavic population converted to Islam and was later assimilated into the Albanian majority. Others retained their Slav identity and became known as Torbeši (Western-Macedonia) and Pomaks (Eastern-Macedonia and Bulgaria).

22 Another ardent proponent of the Arnautasi thesis was Jovan Hadži-Vasiljević who gathered ethnographic evidence to support it (1924, 1939). See also Malcolm (1998:196-199)
orientation of subjects or to assimilate populations by force or otherwise. Since then, contending
nations and religions in the Balkans regard assimilation and conversion (next to expulsion and extermination) as a legitimate means to homogenise society, to neutralise enemies and pacify certain newly acquired territories.\(^{23}\) Many have speculated about bringing about these kinds of shifts in identification by the power of government. After World War One, Serbian policy makers hoped that Albanians could be changed into Muslim Slavs or ‘Serbs’, in order to replace the growing ethnic divide between Serbs and Albanians by a (less problematic) confessional one (see Roux 1992:181). Indeed, after 1918, the Serb-dominated Yugoslav government allowed Albanians to receive education in Serbian from Muslim Slav teachers (Roux 1992:207). This program was part of a policy to reverse Albanianization of the province through assimilation and colonisation. More radical projects of ethnic engineering aimed at the massive expulsion or forceful religious conversion of the Albanians.\(^{24}\) More recently, in the 1970s, the Belgrade authorities promoted Turkish identity in order to counterbalance the political ascendance of the Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia (Bartlett 1980).

The concept of identity

I will now leave these bewildering ethnographic data for what they are, and try to understand them on a more general and theoretical level, in an attempt to fit all these elements of symbiosis and division, and of ambiguous and contested identities, into one theoretical framework. The

\(^{23}\) Probably one of the most ambitious (and notorious) projects of this kind in this century was the expulsion, extermination and forceful conversion of Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism by the Ustaše in the Independent State of Croatia during World War Two.

\(^{24}\) In 1937, Serbian academic Vasa Ćubrilović presented plans to expel the Albanians from Kosovo, in order to ethnically homogenise Yugoslavia. In 1913, Montenegro tried to bring about mass conversions of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity in regions it had just acquired. In the spring of 1914, this led to an exodus of Muslims to Albania and Serbia (see Roux 1992:188 for further references).
main concepts I will use to structure my argument are those of state and politics, religion and religious regimes, core and periphery, and identity.

I will start with the concept of identity. I prefer to use this concept as a theoretical tool rather than the more narrow one of ethnicity. In my view, identity (as a sociological concept) represents primarily a link between the individual and a specific category or group of people. It is based on perceived sameness which at the same time implies difference with others: identity is therefore about classification and the process of associating or equating oneself (or others) with someone or something else (Jenkins 1996:3-4). If a category (which is the result of an act of classification) becomes a principle of group formation, then identity represents primarily a social bond between the individual and a collectivity or community, which may vary according to time and place, and may be accepted or contested by both outsiders and insiders. On the level of the individual person, identity is always multi-layered: every person maintains a variety of identities, i.e. belongs to several categories and groups of people at the same time.

In my view, the concept of identity is more open and flexible that the concept of ethnicity which tends to overemphasise only one particular type of bond, i.e. the ethnic one, as the paramount marker of group identity. As it is shared language that is usually implicated in ethnic identities as the sine qua non of their existence — mutual intelligibility seen as a fundamental prerequisite for any ethnic group (Jenkins 1997:10) — it pushes other relevant and sometimes

25 Identity is often fluid and changeable — or ‘conjunctural’ in James Clifford’s words (1988:10-11) — and because of this there is much to say for the parallel use of the more dynamic terms ‘identification’ or ‘identification processes’. I will also use these terms to emphasise the processual character of these allegiances. Even though some identities, like gender, kinship, and sometimes also ethnic identity (so-called primary identities in Jenkins terminology), are usually more fixed and stable than others, they still need to be constantly re-enacted and reinforced.

26 In western Europe, many (also scholarly) approaches to ethnicity and nationalism are often based on the implicit assumption that language is the central unifying element of ethnic and national groups, without which they are somehow not ‘complete’ (this has for instance created problems for the Bosnian Muslims to be acknowledged in the West as a nation in its own right). It is especially the German philosopher Johann Herder’s understanding of nations
even more important criteria of collective identification (such as those based on religion, tribal distinctions, class, the rural versus urban opposition, etc.) to the background. I am not claiming here that ethnic or national identity (understood here as collective identities primarily based on language, complemented by shared beliefs about a common culture, descent and history) are unimportant. As Jenkins notes, “ethnicity is a collective identity which may have a massive presence in the experience of individuals” (Jenkins 1996:65), and that is certainly true for most of the Balkans nowadays. I only would like to argue that local, regional, and religious identities, to name only a few types of identity that are in the first place based on non-linguistic criteria, have remained very important, in spite of the fact that now more inclusive (ethnic and national) identities are being superimposed as part of a wider process of globalisation. The stress on ethnicity tends to make us blind to other processes of identification and social affiliation. Thus, my preference for the concept of identity is a programmatic one. As a heuristic and analytic strategy, ethnic or national identities should not be regarded as more ‘basic’ or more ‘authentic’ than others; they are only one among several other possible ways of articulating us-them sentiments (cf. Eriksen 1993:156-158; Banks 1996:142-149; Cohen 1985).

Some observers have for instance pointed at the urban-rural dichotomy as an important factor in understanding the specific features of the war in Yugoslavia (see especially Bogdanović 1994). In my opinion, it is indeed necessary to incorporate these elements in our analysis to

and peoples which has put language at the centre of ethnic and national identities. His argument is that the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each nation lies in its language and oral traditions. As Hann writes, Herder’s “romantic equation of language, culture, people and state” has led to the idea that “language provides the most natural basis for the existence of nations” (Hann 1997:121-122). See also Banks (1996:135).

27 The town of Prizren (where I did research in 1986) provides a good example of the importance of the urban-rural dichotomy. Since Ottoman times, Prizren is the symbol of a respected urban tradition in Kosovo, although nowadays Prishtina, a conglomerate of futurist buildings and socialist housing estates, is the capital of the province. The inhabitants of Prizren, in particular the families who have lived here for many generations, have a strong sentiment of urban distinction, which cuts through the ethnic dividing lines. The original townsmen of Prizren cultivate their polyglot urbainity against the peasant newcomers, mostly Albanians, who have massively settled here since the 1960s. This means that they easily switch languages in the course of one conversation, and, moreover, have a outspoken preference
explain what has happened in the former Yugoslavia. We need to go beyond the ‘ethnic’
discourse, the dominant discourse produced by nationalists in most parts of the former
Yugoslavia, which has been too easily adopted by journalists and scientists form abroad. For a
better understanding of the violence one needs to incorporate elements of conflict that derive
from other (more ‘traditional’) contexts: religion, family and kinship, tribalism, gender, etc. Mart
Bax has demonstrated this very well in his work on Bosnia, where he has focused on the local
dimensions of the war (Bax 1995).

An important reason to use the concept of identity instead of ethnicity is that different
principles of affiliation and identification (ethnicity, gender, religion, class, etc.) usually correlate
and overlap. An example is ethnicity and gender: women and men, or the culture specific
categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’, are used to express the distinctiveness of ethnic groups and
nations; ethnic differences are often perceived in gendered terms (Yuval-Davis 1997). At another
level, women (especially mothers and virgins) may symbolise the nation, and in times of war real
women may be perceived as part of the (symbolic) territory that needs to be defended or
conquered.28 Not in the least, the ability of men to check and protect their women becomes a
measure of strength of the ethnic group or nation in question. This is very much reminiscent of the
traditional gender patterns in ‘Dinaric’ society as described by Tomasic (1948). A similar type of
argument can be developed for ethnic and religious identification, which in the Balkans are very
often intertwined.

Even though identities converge, they do not always overlap entirely. Gender relations
may vary substantially within the boundaries of an ethnic group (for instance along the urban-
rural axis), or they may be identical across group boundaries. Not all religious differences are at

for Turkish, the lingua franca of self-respecting townsmen (Jusuf 1987). Most urban Albanian families speak even
Turkish at home, learning Albanian as a second language at school. Among the Serbs of Prizren, the younger
generation has lost the capacity to speak Turkish, while elderly people still know it. For all of them, Turkish was and
still is an adequate way of marking themselves off from peasant newcomers, who in their view have turned Prizren —
once renowned because of its cleanliness— into a garbage dump.

the same time ethnic (although in Kosovo they often tend to become perceived as such), nor are all ethnic boundaries underpinned by religious ones. Therefore, gender and religion should be regarded as separate principles of identification, which have a momentum of their own. Gender relations may be of such a nature that they can potentially undermine the cohesion of the clan group (Denich 1974), just as religious divisions may threaten the unity of a nation as has been the case for instance with the Albanians. Although Albanian nationalist ideology claims that religion was never important to the Albanians —their only true religion being ‘Albanianism’— religion has caused deep divisions within Albanian society (see chapter 6). Among Albanians in Kosovo a certain degree of animosity based on religious difference certainly exists, for instance between Sunni Muslims and Catholics, or between Sunni Muslims and Shi’ite oriented dervish orders.

In this context, it is worth quoting Eriksen, who ends his overview of the study of ethnicity and nationalism (1993) with a critical note on the problems and limitations of the ethnicity concept: “(...) the choice of an analytical perspective or ‘research hypothesis’ is not an innocent act. If one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will ‘find’ it and thereby contribute to constructing it. For this reason, a concern with non-ethnic dimensions of polyethnic societies can be a healthy corrective and supplement to analyses of ethnicity” (1993:161). He further adds: “(...) we ought to be critical enough to abandon the concept of ethnicity the moment it becomes a straitjacket rather than a tool for generating new understanding” (1993:162). Eriksen sympathises with the French anthropological approach which —instead of treating ethnic phenomena as a separate field of study— generally tends to deal with political ethnicity and ethnic identity under the more general headings of the study of politics, identity and ideology (Eriksen 1993:161; cf. Lévi-Strauss 1977).

In sum, the concept of ethnicity does not always help to understand the nuances and complexities of a situation of group conflict. Where ethnicity appears to be the dominant emic (native) discourse, we should not simply take that discourse for granted. In order to improve our understanding a more general and inclusive view is needed, which allows us to be alert to lines of division other than the ‘ethnic’ ones. Apart from ethnic distinctions —which seem to set the tone
in most Western analyses of Balkan society—it is crucial to give more attention to other principles of identification and affiliation which govern much of ordinary social life, such as kinship, gender, the urban-rural dichotomy, and religion. All these criteria are important in establishing bonds of loyalty and assigning social roles.

**States and the politics of identity**

My second point is on the state and the politics of identity. As I try to demonstrate throughout the book, the formation and transformation of ethnic and religious identities is determined by wider political developments. One of the most decisive roles is played by the state. Many social scientists and historians have already pointed at the importance of the state (or any other larger social unit) for the development and sustenance of ethnicity and nationalism. Gellner has shown how modern nation-states (through the standardisation of language, the introduction of a uniform education system, the creation of national labour markets, etc) have gradually forged nations out of diverse human material (Gellner 1983). Another classic is Eugen Weber’s historical work on the formation of French national identity through the workings of the state (1976). However, most studies within the field of ethnicity and nationalism have been based on empirical examples of more or less fixed and stable groups, with the primary focus on mechanisms of boundary maintenance (Barth 1969; see also Jenkins 1997:21). The only exception to this rule is perhaps Benedict Anderson (1991) who demonstrates the changeability and arbitrariness of identity categories in Southeast-Asian colonial context. He shows how administrative penetration of the colonial state has made categories created or invented by the state increasingly real. The smooth functioning of modern bureaucratic states requires certain ‘simplifications’ by which they can master their physical space and populations. Above all, modern states need to develop unambiguous delineations of ethnic identity, with clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

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29 See also Tilly (1975) for Western Europe. As far as the Balkans is concerned, the best and most recent study is probably Karakasidou’s book on the making of a Greek national identity in Greek Macedonia (1997).
These simplifications are inadequate representations of reality, but because they are backed by state power, they transform the real world—as James Scott (1995) has put it—in ways that make it more closely resemble the simplified and legible grid of their observations.

In my view, it is Katherine Verdery (1994) who has worked out this idea most interestingly by pointing at the marked fixity of ethnic identities in Western Europe. Verdery: “The kind of self-consistent person who ‘has’ an ‘identity’ is a product of a specific historical process: the process of modern nation-state formation” (1994:37). It is one of the most essential requirements of the state that a person has only one identity: “one cannot keep track of people who are one thing at one point, another thing at another” (Ibid). Modern state-making presses toward single identities, out of a situation of multiple and often diffuse identities. Verdery uses the example of the disintegration of Yugoslavia to illustrate her point: “Although the 19th and 20th century national movements had produced single identities for people defined as ‘Croats’, ‘Serbs’, ‘Macedonians’, etcetera, in Yugoslavia overall, this process, while advancing, had not gone so far as to preclude holding multiple identities. Within the states of Yugoslav succession, however, this is no longer true. Persons of mixed origin—those who once declared themselves ‘Yugoslavs’—are being forced to elect a single identity. ‘Ethnic cleansing’ does not mean only that people of the ‘other’ group are being exterminated: it also means the extermination of alternative identity choices” (Verdery 1994:38).

Although anthropological studies generally stress that ethnic identities are not necessarily fixed and permanent but malleable, it seems that the scope for the manipulation of ethnic identities is much narrower in Western Europe than in other parts of the world. Verdery: “Such identities will be less flexible wherever the process of modern nation-state formation has the greatest longevity and has proceeded the furthest; wherever long-standing nationalist movements have effectively inculcated the sentiment of a single kind of belonging; and wherever colonial states had more extensive and deeper rather than shallower roots” (Verdery 1994:37). By implication this means that in peripheral societies, identities are more fluid and ambivalent; they can be made and unmade more easily than in modern and industrial societies.
That the conscious development of stable, fixed and unambivalent identities is much weaker in peripheral settings has been confirmed by recent ethnography. In his monograph on the Spanish enclave society of Melilla in Northern Africa, Henk Driessen shows how most categorical distinctions (of ethnicity, religion, gender, etc) become blurred in the margins of society (1992:177-188). Also Wilson and Donnan note that because of the liminal and contested nature of borders, identities there are often shifting and multiple; this is not only true of national identities, but also of other identities such as those based on ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (1998:13). Of similar theoretical relevance is Connell’s observation that working class men who live at the economic margin are often much more pragmatic and flexible in gender relations, in spite of their symbolic display of an aggressive masculinity (1996:168-172). Also in Kosovo, due to its longstanding position at the peripheries of subsequent states (in the Ottoman empire as well as afterwards), group boundaries tend to be more fluid and less institutionalised, and identities are more ambiguous and situational. The establishment of clear labels is a more recent phenomenon, although this process is far from finished, even in present day Kosovo.

One of the most interesting aspects of identity in Kosovo is the existence of ethnic and religious anomalies, small ethnic and religious minorities that do not fit into the neat system of the dominant Serbian-Albanian opposition. For Kosovo, I have particularly in mind the Croats, Turks, Gypsies, Circassians and Slavic Muslims (Goranci), as well as the Catholic Albanians, the Turkophone Albanians (particularly in Prizren) and the Slavophone Albanians (in Orahovac). Their identity can be considered as ‘neither-nor’ or ‘both-and’. They are ‘betwixt and between’ and tend to mess up any neat system of contrast in ethnic classification (Eriksen 1993:156). They remind us of the fact that group boundaries are not unproblematic, and that there is always friction between the ideal ethnic and religious models or ideologies, produced by states and religious regimes, and social reality to which they refer.\(^{30}\) It is primarily the state, which in its

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\(^{30}\) These anomalies, which tend to defy the fundamental categorical distinctions do not only exist in the sphere of ethnic and religious identity, but also in the field of gender. Although Kosovo is a patriarchal society where gender segregation is very profound, examples can be found of women who defy or subvert the ‘natural’ gender order by becoming social men, adopting the male social identity with the (tacit) approval of the family and the wider
efforts to categorise and administer its populations makes these cases into anomalies. As they threaten existing demarcations states (as well as religious regimes) usually aim at reducing their ambiguity and ambivalence, either by absorbing them into the main categories, or by expelling or eliminating them. “Nationalist and other ethnic ideologies hold that social and cultural boundaries should be unambiguous, clear-cut and ‘digital’ or binary. They should also be congruous with spatial, political boundaries. This (...) is an ideal which is very difficult to uphold in practice. Some violent nationalisms may try to eradicate the anomalies (...). In most cases, however, complex realities are coped with more gracefully” (Eriksen 1993:114). As far as Kosovo is concerned, the exodus of Kosovo Croats is an example of what these processes can lead to (see chapter 1).

It is often these anomalous groups which, pressurised by political developments, change their identity and shift their loyalty (see chapters 3 and 5). However, in spite of the fact that they are numerically and politically marginal, they should not be thought of as only the passive recipients of wider developments but also as active agents trying to maximise opportunities within the limits that are provided. They sometimes demonstrate a high degree of inventiveness and creativity in this respect. In general their manoeuvring space depends on the pre-existing classificatory system, which they can do little to change, but nevertheless they try to exploit their ambiguous position to their own advantage. Only in some cases do groups seem to vanish completely, but even then they may reappear. A good example are the Vlachs, who through

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community. Although they constitute an intermediate gender category it probably goes to far to use the designation ‘third gender’ (Grémaux 1994).

31 A current example of the elimination of such an ‘anomaly’ is that of the Circassians. According to a BBC news report (2 August 1998), the Circassians (or Adygs) are leaving Kosovo, fleeing to their historic homeland in the Caucasus. The report states that Albanians consider the (Muslim) Circassians to be too supportive of the Serbs, and that the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army is thought to have threatened them. Source: BBC, 2 August 1998 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/europe/newsid_143000/143667.stm>).
processes of assimilation virtually disappeared in most of the Balkans but now have reappeared in Albania (Schwandner-Sievers 1998). 32

Also in this century, one can find examples of identity shifts ('transfers identitaires' as Roux calls them) in Kosovo, usually as a result of political changes. These shifts usually occur between groups that share some important characteristics such as language or religion, and use that common trait to bridge the gap. These processes may result from political pressure, much as was the case for instance with the (Slavophone) Albanians in Orahovac in the 1920s: during the census of 1921, most of them were registered as Serbs (Krasnič 1957:125). But apart from push factors there may be pull factors in play as well, such as the desire to conceal an inconvenient identity and adopt a better one. In the 1950s, for instance, tens of thousands of Albanians declared themselves as Turks to be able to emigrate to Turkey. 33 And in the 1970s, Muslim Slavs in Kosovo declared themselves as Albanians, later again turning back to their original Muslim (Slav) identity. 34

Sometimes, groups with a weakly established or ambiguous identity become a bone of contention between more powerful groups. The latter claim such groups and dispute the 'authenticity' and 'credibility' of claims made by others; the identity of such small groups is not in the first place established by the group itself, but determined by other more powerful actors as

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32 During the Yugoslav census of 1948, there were 103,000 people registering as Vlachs, and during the census of 1981 only 32,000 (Roux 1992:46). Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the first figure was inflated because the term 'Vlach' in the 1948 census was also used to include the Romanian-speaking population of north-eastern Serbia — people who were not considered to be Vlachs in the common use of the term (Noel Malcolm, personal communication).

33 During the 1948 census there were 98,000 people declaring themselves as Turks, and five years (1953) later that number had almost tripled to 260,000 (Roux 1992:155).

34 The main example is Sredačka or Sredska Župa, near Prizren: during the census of 1971, 80% of the population of these nine mountain villages declared themselves as Albanians, while in 1981 92% percent as (Slav) Muslims (Roux 1992:420-421; Vukanović 1986-I:208-211).
An interesting example are the Goranci, Muslim Slavs in Gora (a mountainous region near Prizren at the Albanian border). Before World War II (1939) the Yugoslav authorities subsumed the Goranci under the category of 'non-Slavs', probably regarding them as Turks because of their religion (Roux 1992:202). After World War Two, their names were Albanianized (for instance Hasanović changed into Hasani), and in the middle of the 1980s the Macedonian press claimed that they are actually Macedonians (i.e. Torbeši), in spite of the fact that they are being educated in Serbo-Croat (Roux 1992:421-422). The inhabitants of Gora declared themselves as Muslims during the censuses of 1971 and 1981, but they seem to prefer the local term Goranci as the most appropriate label.

Religion & religious regimes

Apart from the state, I think it is important to look at the role religious regimes have played in the creation and (trans)formation of identities. Instead of regarding religion and politics as separate domains of human societies, I would like to see them as intimately connected, as expressed in Mart Bax’s concept of religious regimes: religious regimes can be regarded as formations of power and dependence operating parallel (and often opposite) to states (Bax 1987, Wolf 1991). This is especially relevant in the Balkans, where the Ottoman state, as a force of

35 A quite similar case is that of the Pomaks in Bulgaria, who have been zigzagging between a 'Turkish' identity (because of religion) and 'Bulgarian' identity (because of language). To bring an end to confusion and uncertainty, quite a large portion of ‘Bulgarian’ Pomaks in the Rhodopes mountains have converted to Christianity, while other Pomaks have opted for the Turkish identity (Todorova 1997b).

36 Bax has defined a religious regime as “a formalised and institutionalised constellation of human interdependencies of variable strength, which is legitimised by religious ideas and propagated by religious specialists”. As the concept is an ‘open’ one, it is applicable to all kinds of religious phenomena and at various levels of societal integration. Bax stresses that religious regimes are power constellations, or political constellations, which implies the formulation of ideologies. “It (...) induces us to investigate religion in terms of cultural content, structural form, and the interplay between these two aspects” (Bax 1987:2).
integration, was weakly developed, assigning an important role to religious formations as the main vehicles of communal identification: due to the Ottoman millet system the politically relevant identities were defined in religious terms. The millet system nurtured a strong sense of belonging which was determined by religious affiliation rather than ethnicity or language (Poulton & Taji-Farouki 1997:3). In fact, ethnic identification in the Balkans still very much relies on religious affiliation, which explains the frequent use of the term ethno-religious identities.

What is important to point out is that the millet system did not put all religious communities on equal footing. It created a situation of what Roux calls ‘hierarchised pluralism’ (1992:60-61): although the non-Muslim religious communities were fully recognised they were also subordinated. Despite their legal subordination, the millets enjoyed considerable autonomy provided they accepted the inferior status of a tolerated religious community. Though one may object to the systemic inequality, the system nevertheless guaranteed the continued existence of certain groups, protecting them against assimilation or complete elimination (Roux 1992:61-62).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman millet system made way for the European concept of the nation. New perceptions of (ethnic and national) identity emerged, and the Christian millets became the kernels of new national communities (Karpat 1985). This is especially true for the Christian-Orthodox nations (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria), where the millet system produced a very strong link between national and religious identity (Arnakis 1963; Petrovich 1980). The orthodox churches adopted a central role in various Balkan nationalist movements, while religious ideas and doctrines were important in articulating nationalist discourse. Only at a later stage, at the end of the nineteenth century, did a similar tendency develop among

37 The term millet refers particularly to the non-Muslim religious communities, designating the organisation of each group under its ecclesiastic leaders. The Ottoman millet system was perhaps not a system, but rather a form of indirect rule through the existing church organisations. Muslims were under direct rule of the sultan’s bureaucracy and enjoyed a privileged position. The Orthodox and Armenian millets were by far the largest, whereas the Jewish millet was much smaller compared to the other two. The Roman Catholic millet was only established in 1839, at the start of the Tanzimat reforms. Whereas the Orthodox church was an accepted institution of the empire, the Catholic church was regarded with deep suspicion (Malcolm 1994:55).
Balkan Muslims: a shift occurred from a communal identity based solely on Islam to one where ethnicity became an important factor (Poulton & Taji-Farouki 1997:242). Also here attempts were made to inject national identities with religious elements, such as in Albania (see chapters 6).

Though ethnic and national identities have become primary identities in most of the Balkans, the religious dimension has remained strong. The old millet concept of a community primarily based on religion and religious affiliation is still perpetuated. Religion continues to play an important if not a decisive role in processes of group identification and demarcation. As Todorova shows for the Pomaks in Bulgaria, the millet consciousness has been most resilient among certain groups of Balkan Muslims who have retained a fluid consciousness as far as their ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ allegiances is concerned (1997b:75). In most general terms, however, religious identification has been made subordinate to ethnic identification, and religious rivalry has been transformed into ethnic and national antagonisms. In Kosovo itself, for instance, the current Serb-Albanian conflict has replaced the old confessional divide between Muslims and Christians.  

Ethnic lines of division have become more important than religious ones, in spite of the fact that the latter continue to play a crucial role in defining the former. Also within religious communities as such (the Orthodox church, the official Islamic Community, and the Roman Catholic church) ethnic differences have become more significant, and the sense of a collective identity across ethnic lines of division has eroded. Before the former Yugoslavia fell apart this already led to a compartmentalisation of the organisation of the different churches along ethnic lines (Pavlowitch 1988:107). These developments have also been reflected at the level of

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Davison notes, however, that the religious divide was not all-embracing: the Muslim peasant was generally no better off than the ordinary non-Muslim. “He was as much in need of reformed government as the Christian, but he had neither treaty, foreign power, nor patriarch to protect him, and his lot was generally unknown in Europe. The line of basic demarcation ran, therefore, not between Muslim and Christian, Turk and non-Turk, but between ruler and ruled, oppressor and oppressed” (1973:63). Those on top were often Christians who closely co-operated with the Ottomans: merchants, bankers, land owners and higher ecclesiastics.
The fact that Albanian Catholics, including many prominent clergymen, have actively participated in the movement for an independent Kosovo has had the inevitable side-effect of alienating the Catholic Croat minority in Kosovo.

In (local) contexts religious and ethnic identification is often so much intertwined that it is sufficient to know the confessional background of an individual to determine his or her ethnic identity. As a criterion of identity religion has remained very important, although most people are not great believers and do not comply with religious precepts. Religious symbols and customs, though often only cultivated in vague and residual forms, have become part of the national heritage, and as such help to delineate ethnic boundaries. In Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, religious affiliation defines and delineates ethnic identities, since all groups speak the same language (Cvijić 1986, Ramet 1989). There, ethnic identities are primarily expressed in religious customs, symbols and emblems, for instance in the way a person crosses oneself (using two or three fingers), or, as in the case of Muslim men, in bodily marks like circumcision.

Several authors have, therefore, in some way or another stressed the importance of the religious element in explaining the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, especially since churches

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39 Since the 1960s, in Kosovo ethnic divisions within the churches and religious communities have become clearer with the formation of a separate suffragan diocese for Albanian Catholics (in Ferizaj) within the Skopje bishopric, and the creation of the Community of Dervish Orders (in Prizren) next to the Sarajevo based Islamic Community (see chapter 4). Whereas Letnica was for long the only Catholic Marian pilgrimage centre in Kosovo, there has now been created a parallel ‘Albanian’ shrine in Zym, a Catholic Albanian village near Prizren.

40 It is this close equation between religion and ethnicity that in my view justifies the separate status of Muslims in Bosnia as a nation. Although religion is usually mentioned as a key marker of ethnic identity, it is often not considered sufficient, at least not in everyday parlance. As I said before, language is usually seen as the most decisive element, without which a nation cannot pass the exam of nation-ness. Many outside observers have therefore had difficulties in acknowledging the Bosnian Muslims as a nation in its own right, viewing the status of a religiously defined group insufficient to justify the political claims that ‘real’ nations like the Serbs and the Croats can make (a view shared by Serbian and Croatian nationalists). It is significant in this context to note that Bosnian Muslims now preferably use the term Bošnjaci (Bosnians) for themselves, and that they have started to cultivate ‘Bosnian’ as a separate language alongside Serbian and Croatian.
and mosques were major targets of destruction during the war. Paul Mojzes was one of the first scholars to point out that the religious dimension should not be ignored: “the concrete historical embodiments of religions in the Balkans did contribute religious traits to the present warfare, usually in combination with ethnic and other aspects” (1995:126). Although he disagrees with the view that religious differences are at the heart of the violent clashes in the Balkans, he emphasises that these conflicts have been imbued with religious meanings. The use of religious symbols and emblems does not say much about the level of actual religiosity of those individuals who use them; they function like ‘clan totems’ and create ‘tribal’ distinctions between otherwise very similar and related groups that have common cultural and historical roots (Pavlowitch 1988:94-111). In more general terms, religious ceremonies and symbols induce feelings of belonging, and provide the means to sacralise the nation and demonise its enemies, to reduce complex social and historical realities to a clear and simple distinction between the forces of good and evil. Much of this could be observed in Bosnia-Herzegovina: religious labels were used to enforce ethnic loyalty both by political and religious leaders. Priests tolerated and stimulated the use of religion for ethnic or national purposes, presenting themselves as national leaders and hoping in this way to enlarge their following. Many of them were enthusiastically supporting a militant type of nationalism before and during the war (Mojzes 1995:125-151). During the war, quite a number of them joined in at the frontlines, offering moral support and even fighting at the side of soldiers.

All of this shows that, although nationalism is a modern phenomenon, it frequently draws on ‘traditional’ values and symbols, borrowed particularly from kinship and religion, to instil feelings of belonging to the wider and more abstract collective that is represented by the nation. Membership of the national community is often imagined in terms of (metaphoric) kinship, in which notions of shared blood and common descent are stressed. The nation is depicted as one large ‘family’, or symbolised as a mother (or a virgin) which expects men to protect her against those outside forces who want to violate and desecrate her. The nation is usually also seen as a ‘sacred community’, for which individual members of the nation should be ready to die. Death, sacrifice, and martyrdom are usually important nationalist values, which make nationalist ideology
more often than not quite violent in character (Eriksen 1993:107). I will show in the last two chapters, however, that there are clear variations in the role religious ideology plays in Balkan nationalism.

Violence, identity, and the nation-state

Violence is a main force behind the formation or transformation of ethnic and national identities, either as a way of bolstering the nation (which is most common), or as a force which impels people to change their identity or dissimulate one (which is rarer but not uncommon). War has often been the engine of nation-building, and the Balkans seems to be no exception. In short, the war fought in former Yugoslavia and the processes of national homogenisation and ‘ethnic cleansing’ that have accompanied the war seem to have been primarily motivated by the necessity to forge single and unambiguous identities out of a population that is very much mixed and of diverse origins, and to erase the elements of mixture, ‘pollution’ and ambiguity that are threatening the newly established national states. It seems that the violence in former Yugoslavia is in the end not only the result of opposite and incompatible identities, it is perhaps even more the means to achieve them.

Violence is not only functional in creating new realities on the ground, like gaining control over territories and expelling and ‘exchanging’ unwanted populations, processes which can be subsumed under the term ‘ethnic unmixing’ (Brubaker 1995:204). It also helps to deconstruct and disentangle the legacies of shared life and common existence in the minds of victims and perpetrators alike, and establish unambiguous identities and undivided loyalties. By constructing solid and impenetrable boundaries, violence creates purity out of impurity. It is therefore helpful, or sometimes even essential, in creating new identities and loyalties: “violence

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41 The importance of religion as a main ideological source and force in present-day nationalism has started to receive the attention it deserves. See for instance the work of Stanley Tambiah (1986) and Bruce Kapferer (1988) on Sri Lanka,
may achieve results that cannot otherwise be achieved” (Sorabji 1995:81). Through its ability to engineer new situations, it also helps to produce self-fulfilling prophesies: it makes reality resemble the ideological constructs that underpin the violence.42

In Bosnia, as Cornelia Sorabji notes, violence was central to alter local understandings of the category of the ‘nation’ (narod), and to narrow down the complexity of pre-war collective identifications to just one: that of the ethnic nation. Violence changes the perceptions held both by victims and perpetrators about the very nature of identity groups and boundaries. Especially brutal and personalised violence is a kind of ‘counterpoint to culture’ (Daniel 1996:194-212): it is capable of creating ‘blank spaces’, erasing old memories, and altering mental categories and beliefs (Sorabji 1995:91-92). In such situations, victims as well as perpetrators loose the images of previous coexistence and are made to forget how things used to be. Apart from negating the familiar, violence helps to construct something new: it functions as a rite of passage to a new type of situation, to a new consciousness, to new statuses, loyalties and identities. As anthropological studies on primitive warfare have shown, violence and violent initiation rites may serve to create bonds among a group of men, and the more violent the rites are the more effective they are (cf. Chagnon 1983; Turnbull 1972). War itself is probably the most effective way to bring about these changes, by blood, sacrifice, and suffering, which have an indelible effect on the collective memory. Therefore, in nationalist discourse violence and war is often considered as a positive force, as a means to regenerate and purify the nation, and as a matter of societal ‘hygiene’: in the never-ending Darwinian battle between the nations of the world only

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42 This has been shown in the case of the Bosnian Muslims. Continuous Serbian propaganda, depicting Muslims as fundamentalists embarking upon a Jihad against the Serbs, combined with the subsequent use of massive military power to counter the alleged Muslim threat, has made reality more and more resemble propaganda. Fundamentalist tendencies of some wider significance have indeed emerged in Bosnia after the start of the war.
the fittest will survive. Periodical violence and war contributes to the preservation of a healthy nation (Pick 1993).43

Apart from being an engine of identity construction, integration and homogenisation, violence is also a force which impels the odd individual and small minorities to change their identity or dissimulate one. In the Balkans, violence and existential insecurity have always been important forces behind these processes of identity transformation. Flexibility with regard to identity is in many ways crucial for survival, and under these circumstances, non-dominant identities tend to become increasingly insecure, changeable and fluid. Religious conversion, the adoption of another ethnic identity, or forms of ethnic or religious mimicry, are all strategies of adaptation or survival (see especially chapters 3 and 5).44 In cases of necessity, when sheer physical or social survival is at stake, forms of ethnic and religious dissimulation and identity transformation may be the only way to avoid death or deportation. In a situation in which the state monopoly of violence is weak or is eroding, the identity of those who can organise an effective physical or military defence is most steadfast and dominant, and even tends to acquire a certain ‘absorbing’ capacity towards other less powerful groups. In this way, Serb families in some parts of Kosovo (for instance in Orahovac) were incorporated into Albanian tribes or clans, where they enjoyed full protection (Krasniči 1957:123).45 During the recent wars in the former

43 That is why during the Bosnian war, nationalist politicians from Republika Srpska (for instance Biljana Plavšić and Sonja Karadžić), exalted about the healthy environment that exists for Serbs in war-time Bosnia. In their view, life in war-time Bosnia evolves on the basis of vital instincts, which has contributed to the Bosnian Serbs’ vitality, whereas Serbia (and especially Belgrade) has degenerated (Čolović 1994:33-39).

44 Also bi- or multi-lingualism can be seen as a strategy of this kind. In the case of Kosovo it is interesting to note that, at the end of the nineteenth century, bilingualism was much more widespread among Serbs (at that time the weaker group) than among Albanians (Roux 1992:205). This situation has been reversed in this century. For bilingualism as a strategy of adaptation see also Lockwood (1981).

45 The incorporation of non-kin into kin-groups is a more common phenomenon in marginal regions of Europe. The household tries to strengthen its position vis-à-vis other clans through recruitment of others, and spiritual kinship ties. Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss’s concept of ‘house societies’ (Hann 1995:103).
Yugoslavia, there were similar examples: for instance Bosnian Muslims who converted to Serbian Orthodoxy in Republika Srpska, or Serbs in Croatia who changed their names to Catholic ones and even demanded withdrawal from the Orthodox church in order to become Catholics. Keeping low profile and demonstrating loyalty to the state has been the only way to secure a more or less normal existence (Vreme News Digest, 12 June 1995).

Dissimulation is a universal phenomenon. Erving Goffman (1959) has shown that in any social situation people try to engineer a convincing impression, which he compares with ‘acting’ and the putting up of masks. In situations of gross inequality and violence the tendency to dissimulate is even stronger, or as James Scott writes in his book Weapons of the Weak: “…the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask” (Scott 1990:3). Also Barnes has noted that lying can be expected foremost in highly competitive contexts (like warfare and politics), and in relations of domination and subordination (Barnes 1994:20-35 and 83-86). If the necessity is there, people may tell lies or falsify their identity in order to protect themselves. Among minority religions or religious sects, dissimulation may even become an accepted strategy to prevent persecution. Also in the Balkans, deceit, telling lies, and other forms of dissimulation have been

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46 Processes of realignment with another ethnic group may also be the result of rivalries in the group of origin. As a result ethnic stigmatisation may take place, and individuals can be ‘expelled’ from their own ethnic group and ‘pushed’ into absorption by the enemy group. In his recent book on Medjugorje, Bax describes how the members of a Croat clan, involved in conflicts with two other Croat clans, align themselves with Serbs in the region as a result of which they are identified as ‘little Serbs’. They were finally cleansed from the area by Croat forces (Bax 1995:101-118).

47 See for instance the strategies of religious dissimulation among Protestants (during the Contra-reformation), and among Marranos or crypto-Jews in Spain (during the Inquisition), and the concept of taqiyah among the Shi’ites (Zagorin 1990). Also the Bektushis (in Albania and elsewhere in the Ottoman empire) employed taqiyah as a means of defence and survival (Birge 1937:78). More in general religious esoterism (the concept of secret religious knowledge), which is central to the religious doctrines of many heterodox Sufi orders and other religious sects, can also be seen as a form of dissimulation (Zagorin 1990:11). Another example in the Ottoman Balkans was that of the Dönme, a crypto-Jewish sect that was concentrated in Salonica (present-day Thessaloniki) (Ross 1982:83-98).
widespread strategies of protection of evasion in the face of superior and hostile power. The archetypal South Slav hero is not Prince Lazar or Miloš Obilić (who, because they die for a higher cause, represent a purely moral position) but Kraljević Marko: the Turkish vassal who cooperates with the Ottomans but at the same time deceives and outwits them in his defence of the Christian population. As Tatyana Popović writes: “In the oral tradition the Balkan people lived the imaginary heroic life of Prince Marko. As they changed him from a vassal in the Sultan’s service into a fighter of the Turks, so they transmuted themselves from the reality of slavery to the spirit of active national resistance and the struggle for justice” (Popović 1988:140).

In modern political terms, people often tend to identify or at least to align themselves nominally with those in power at a particular point in time. At the end of World War Two and in the post-war period, many people in Yugoslavia became communists, for many reasons but usually not out of ideological commitment (see for instance Doder 1979:112). Now many people have become nationalists: as Ivan Čolović has formulated it, as soon as the ‘political traffic light’ switches, people change their political allegiances to those who are currently in power, at least outwardly. In modern conditions of television and other mass media this means that they carefully emulate what the ‘most’ authoritative voice — *His Master’s Voice* — tells them to think and believe (Čolović 1994:57-62). It seems that this situation shall only be overcome when conditions of economic stability and existential and legal security can be established in all parts of the former Yugoslavia.

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48 See for instance du Boulay (1976), who deals with forms of lying and deceit in a Greek village. For an excellent anthropological analysis of lying in a Muslim village in Lebanon see Gilsenan (1976).