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

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CHAPTER 2

Christian Shrines and Muslim Pilgrims: Joint Pilgrimages and Ambiguous Sanctuaries

In the previous chapter I mentioned the 'ecumenical' pilgrimage to the Catholic church of Letnica, which is only one of the many places in this part of the Balkans where the devotion for a particular saint or shrine has been shared by different ethnic and religious groups. In this chapter I will further pursue this subject, focusing primarily on (Serbian) Orthodox shrines, which are much more numerous in the southern parts of the Balkans and have demonstrated a similar propensity to attract pilgrims of various ethno-religious backgrounds. The main questions which I will address are: How can this kaleidoscopic image of pilgrimage and worship of saints in Kosovo be reconciled with the now dominant image of sharp divisions between quarrelling groups of differing ethno-religious backgrounds, which have turned the province into one of the most dangerous hotbeds of Eastern Europe. In the words of Victor Turner: to what extent do these 'shared' places of pilgrimage create real communitas, beyond ethnic and religious boundaries? Are ethnic and religious oppositions temporarily 'forgiven and forgotten', or is it a matter of continuous differences and conflicts? We will see that a certain degree of communitas is not entirely absent, but is always a precarious matter which, under certain conditions, can turn into precisely the opposite. As I pointed out in my introduction, because of their mixed and ambiguous character, pilgrimages and forms of saint veneration like the one in Letnica exhibit an intrinsic tendency towards tension and conflict. A sanctuary may become a bone of contention and, as the case may be, can be Islamicized, Christianized, annexed or destroyed. This is in sharp contrast with Turner's view of pilgrimage as generally harmonious, and confirms the criticism that has been launched against him ever since, notably by Michael Sallnow (1981, 1987). Sallnow demonstrated that pilgrimages can be an arena for competition and conflict between and within local communities.

I will start this chapter with a description of three recent examples of mixed Christian-Muslim pilgrimages to Orthodox shrines. The first two examples are mainly described on the
basis of my own observations (1986, 1990 and 1991), while the third is based on an analysis of press reports (1988). In the first case, the sabor in the monastery of Gračanica, despite some friction, an overall picture of relative harmony between the different groups of pilgrims emerges. In the second case, in Zočište (near Orahovac), increased tensions between Albanians and Serbs almost brought an end to this example of a ‘mixed’ pilgrimage. Also in the third case, the monastery in Ostrog (in Montenegro), problems occurred between Muslim pilgrims, especially dervishes and sheikhs, and the Orthodox custodians of this famous shrine. To identify the sources of conflict and conditions for harmony, the three examples will be compared. I shall then examine at some length the history of ambiguous sanctuaries in this part of the Balkans, primarily using examples connected with the Bektashi order. The Bektashis, which have been the most important and influential dervish order in Albanian history, have always demonstrated considerable tolerance towards prevailing Christian traditions, especially among Muslim converts.

The Muslim Gypsy pilgrimage to Gračanica

The Serbian Orthodox monastery of Gračanica, a few kilometres south of Priština, is one of the largest and best preserved medieval sanctuaries in Kosovo. It was built in the beginning of the fourteenth century, by the Serbian king Milutin, and survived Ottoman rule relatively unscathed. The monastery is a reminder of the heyday of the Serbian kingdom and serves as an important national symbol for Serbs in a region now almost entirely inhabited by Albanian Muslims. Since the end of the 1980s, the monastery has become an important meeting place of Serbian nationalists, and in June 1989 a massive Serbian pilgrimage took place here as part of the commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo (1389). Several hundreds of thousands of people

1 Apart from the cases analysed in this chapter, there are other examples of Orthodox shrines which have always attracted Muslim pilgrims, like the Serbian Orthodox monasteries of Devič and Visoki Dečani in Kosovo.

2 In the nineteenth century, this battle, in which the Serbs were defeated by the Turks, became the main source of inspiration for the Serbian national movement. In the late 1980s, under conditions of rising ethno-religious tensions,
gathered at the Gračanica monastery and in Gazimestan, where the battle took place more than six hundred years ago. In the monastery the relics of Prince Lazar, commander of the Serbian armies and martyr on the Kosovo battlefield, were displayed.³

Although this 'political' pilgrimage was a one-time event, Gračanica also has an established reputation as a place of pilgrimage in a more traditional sense. Every year on Assumption Day (Uspenje Bogorodice or Velja Bogorodica) a large sabor (religious festival) takes place here, which I have witnessed several times (1986, 1990, and 1991). It makes a surprising spectacle if we consider the symbolic importance of Gračanica for Serbian nationalism. A great number of Muslim Gypsies from all over Kosovo take possession of the monastery grounds and celebrate this holy day together with Serbian pilgrims. Most of them arrive on the eve of the Marian feast and bivouac in the porta, the large walled garden around the magnificent monastery church. The Gypsy pilgrims include people who are ill and women who are either barren or pregnant. They spend the night here, usually together with their relatives, believing that their overnight stay will quicken their recovery or promote a pregnancy or easy delivery. However, the majority of the sojourners, Gypsies and Serbs alike, are primarily attracted by the prospect of having a good time. The pubs in the vicinity of the monastery offer live music and ample facilities for dancing. A small field just outside the convent walls is transformed into a fairground and in the porta traders sell souvenirs and trinkets.

As far as I could judge in the years I witnessed the event, Muslim Gypsies do not attend the lengthy church ceremonies on the eve of the holy day, and on Assumption Day itself. This is mainly a Serbian affair. Nevertheless, Gypsies, in particular women and children, enter the church to kiss the altar icons, to light candles and donate small gifts, in money or in kind. After vespers, barren Gypsy women encircle the church three times with long coloured ribbons, which remain tied round the building overnight. These are taken home and a belt made of them for a

the Kosovo battle regained its significance and became once more the main cornerstone of Serbian nationalism (see chapter 7).

³ After this event, the Monastery of Gračanica has continued to be a centre of nationalist activity. It became the scene of gatherings of Kosovo Serbs and Serbian nationalists, a place where Chetniks—armed Serb irregulars—took oaths of loyalty to the Serbian cause (Thompson 1992:142).
woman, and sometimes her husband, to wear. This is a widespread practice which happens in many other shrines, like Letnica, and it is believed that within the year the woman will become pregnant. At daybreak the next morning, many Gypsy families sacrifice a hen or a lamb, which they prepare for a festive family meal on the spot.

One noticeable detail is that the Gypsies perform their rituals individually or within a small circle of close relatives and friends, whereas the ceremonies and festivities of the Serbs are much more communal in character. Led by Orthodox priests, Serbs jointly sing and pray at vespers on the eve of the holiday and at matins on Assumption Day itself, without Gypsy participation. After the morning prayers, Serbs march three times around the church in a procession headed by the clergy, which in this case includes also the igumanija ( prioress) of the nunnery. The priests carry processional banners and icons, and they are followed by the choir and congregation displaying Serbian flags. Finally, the priests bless the bread and wine and consecrate huge amounts of water. While Serbs line up to be blessed by the priests, Serb and Gypsy women jostle one another before the vessels filled with holy water, which they will take home in bottles. At noon the ceremonies are concluded, and dozens of Serb pilgrims who come from afar and who have spent the night in the monastery are regaled with a dinner by the nuns of the monastery. They usually work day and night to prepare the meals and welcome the guests.

Although Serbs and Muslim Gypsies jointly congregate at Gračanica, they do not seek each other’s company, nor do they intermingle in the religious or ritual sphere. Each group has more or less its own domain in or around the church. The Gypsies occupy the porta, where they spend the night, sacrifice animals, eat, drink and enjoy themselves. The Serbian domain consists of the monastery buildings, including the church in the centre of the porta and the pubs just outside the monastery walls. Gypsies do frequently enter the church, but Serbs who gather there often seem to perceive this as an infringement of their own religious ceremonies. The Gypsies’ behaviour, somewhat disrespectful and improper in the eyes of the Serbs, frequently causes irritation. During the church ceremonies, Gypsies bring hens and noisy children inside, and make their round through the church undisturbed by Serbian glances, performing their own private rituals that do not always conform with the prescribed Serbian Orthodox ones. Once in a while, the nuns and other surveillants posted inside intervene, and in the meantime they keep a close watch on the money that pilgrims leave behind on the icons, for fear of Gypsy thieves. From time
to time, they collect the money and put it safely away in wooden money boxes underneath some of the icons. However, apart from minor irritations and stereotypical suspicion towards Gypsies, there seems to be no serious friction between the two groups. Serb and Gypsy pilgrims meet in relative harmony, though direct contact is avoided.

It seems that the Gypsy pilgrimage to Gračanica is a relatively recent phenomenon. The Serbian ethnographer Tatomir Vukanović writes that in the past Gračanica was exclusively a place of pilgrimage for Kosovo Serbs; only since the fifties has it grown into an object of worship for Muslim Gypsies as well (Vukanović 1966). In addition Janićije Popović, who (as Gračanica’s village teacher) wrote a short but extremely interesting monograph on Gračanica (1927), does refer to Velika Gospoda as the major festival of the church but does not mention the presence of any Gypsy pilgrims there. He writes that the sabor was the only one in the whole region, and that it was visited by Serbs from all over Kosovo (Peć, Đakovica, Prizren, and above all, the region of Morava, i.e. Gnjilane and surrounding areas) (Popović 1927:52-53).

As early as Turkish times the Serb congregation gathered here, mistrustfully observed by Turks and Albanians, and hoping for a better future without them. As Popović writes: "[I]n front of the wide-open eyes of Turkish police, gendarmerie and unruly and armed Arnauts, who made their way bristling through the thick crowd and peered into each corner, people were singing —to be sure only innocent songs— and dancing to the sounds of drums, fiddles, a trumpet, clarinets, and flutes; and behind the former’s backs, they secretly whispered of their hope of imminent liberation.” (Popović 1927:53).

Even though Muslim Gypsies have started to join Serb festivities in Gračanica relatively recently, I can only guess at the specific reasons for this development. The recent Gypsy

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4 At the time of his writing, however, the festival seems to have been on the decline (Popović 1927:54). Popović’s monograph is fascinating because of the historical details it offers regarding the conflicts between the caretakers of the monastery, a Serbian family of priests who, between 1759 and 1870, established a kind of independent and hereditary religious regime over the shrine, and the higher church authorities in Priština and Prizren who tried to bring the monastery under their control. The efforts of the latter were only successful in 1870, when the monastery was brought under the control of the Priština municipal church council. However, this state of affairs continued to arouse strong opposition for the next 40 years, not only from the Popović family, but also from the local village population.
devotion for Gračanica might be related to the fact that in Kosovo many Gypsies feel at odds with the Albanian majority, and therefore have started to identify with the Serbian minority (see more about this subject in chapter 5). As early as 1986, I heard from Gypsies living near the monastery that Gračanica had become a kind of refuge for Muslim Gypsies from nearby Priština who accused Albanians of attempts to assimilate them. Nevertheless, despite Serb hospitality the municipality of Gračanica has not been very tolerant toward these Gypsy newcomers: the Serb authorities have prohibited the building of a small mosque to serve Muslim Gypsies. And in 1991, when I visited the sabor in Gračanica for the last time, new signs of growing Serb exclusivism—clearly reflecting wider political developments—were discernible: Gypsy pilgrims were ousted from the porta which had been their domain in the years before. As they were not allowed to camp there, to sacrifice animals and prepare meals, they were forced to do this outside the monastery. As I heard with my own ears, the plea of one Gypsy “we have been coming to this Serbian monastery for over five centuries”, trying to invoke an image of Gypsy faithfulness to the Serbs since the Battle of Kosovo, did not impress the igumanija.

Zočište: the end of a ‘mixed’ pilgrimage

In July 1991, I went to visit another shrine in Zočište, a small mixed Serb-Albanian village three miles south-east of Orahovac. Just outside the village, on a hilltop, there is a very old medieval Serbian-Orthodox monastery (fourteenth-century or even older), a shrine which has a reputation for being particularly helpful in cases of eye diseases and mental and psychosomatic disorders. The church is called Sveti Vrači (the Holy Medics) after the saints Kuzman and Damnjan who are the patron saints of this monastery. The church is (like Gračanica) situated in the middle of the porta, but (unlike Gračanica) only consists of a low and very sober one-nave building.

The reason I wanted to visit this shrine was that, until the late 1980s, many Muslim Albanians from Zočište as well as from nearby Orahovac would go to the Zočište monastery to join the festivities around the sabor, which takes place every year on July 14.5 The story goes

5 Most Albanian Muslims in Orahovac are not strictly orthodox (Sunni) Muslims, but belong to one of the several dervish orders which are very active in this part of Kosovo (Krasniči 1957:94). See also chapter 4.
that before the Albanian protests of 1989, which were violently suppressed in Orahovac, Albanian pilgrims were even more numerous here than Serbs. In a more distant past, local Albanians, together with the Serb inhabitants of the village, had once helped the priest to defend himself against external Albanian attackers (Kostić 1928:55-56). Recently however, as a result of the tense political situation, Albanians have stopped visiting the monastery: in the last few years the growing distrust between Albanians and Serbs has made an end to this ‘mixed’ pilgrimage. As I heard from a local Albanian, only a handful of old and very ill Albanians would make the effort to go to Zočište, and perhaps some Muslim Gypsies, as well as Slav Muslims and Turks from Prizren. In the village itself relations seemed to have deteriorated, partly due to the fact that the Albanians have started to outnumber the Serbian inhabitants (as a result of their higher birth-rate). Local Serbs told me that they felt being pressured into leaving the village, especially by the strong Albanian clans of the village. The small town of Orahovac, where ethnic relations had been quite harmonious before, was now ethnically segregated. As since 1990 most

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6 In a number of other important Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo (Visoko Dečani, Dević, and the Patriarchate of Peć) protection was formalised in the institution of the so-called manastirske vojvode (Serbian) or vojvodat e kishës (Albanian), i.e. monastery ‘dukes’ or guards. They were provided by powerful Muslim Albanian clans who posted one of their members in the monastery to guard it against outside attacks, and in return they received payments or certain privileges. This has probably saved these sanctuaries from destruction, especially in times of war and upheaval. Sometimes these guards also provided protection against bandits, to pilgrims who travelled to the shrine. The main study on this phenomenon was done by the Kosovo Albanian ethnologist Mark Krasniqi (Krasnići 1958). In a recent article Milutin Djuričić (a Kosovo Serb lawyer and specialist in Albanian customary law) criticises Krasniqi for presenting a too ‘romantic’ picture of these monastery guards (Djuričić 1994). Not the solemn oath (besa) to protect monasteries (required by Albanian customary law), nor the prestige connected to this position, or even respect and awe for these sanctuaries, was their main motive, as Djuričić says, but rather material gain and exploitation. Djuričić claims that the monasteries were forced to accept protection by powerful Albanian clans which were otherwise bound to cause trouble. In the Patriarchate of Peć relations with the monastery vojvoda were broken in the beginning of the 1980s, whereas in Visoki Dečani this institution continued to exist until 1991, when the Albanian guard resigned because of political reasons (Djuričić 1994:690-691).
Albanians had been sacked from their jobs, there was bad blood between Serbs and Albanians who started to boycott the Serbian sabor in Zočište en masse.⁷

During the sabor, the Zočište monastery, though much smaller than Gračanica, offers a very similar spectacle: near the entrance towards the monastery’s porta there are booths mainly manned by Gypsies who are selling snacks and all kinds of toys and trinkets, whereas within the confines of the porta there is an outdoor café run by Serbian youth from the village. Gypsies run simple and improvised fairground attractions to earn some money. During my visit in 1991, within the porta, a Serbian tradesman was selling posters and badges with the images of leading Serbian nationalists like Vuk Drašković, Slobodan Milošević, and Vojislav Šešelj, and small Serbian flags and other Chetnik paraphernalia. From the café I could hear old Chetnik songs, and down in the village I saw later that afternoon an Albanian café with Albanian music pouring out of the speakers opposite to a Serb marquee with even more deafening decibel levels of Serbian songs.

Pilgrims enter the church and crawl under a small altar where they expect to be most susceptible to the graces of the two saints. Especially older people and women with sick children lay down, sometimes covering their heads with the red table cloth that hangs from the altar.

⁷ Orahovac is a fascinating place with regard to Albanian-Serb relations, because of mutual assimilation and absorption. One of the most interesting features is that most Albanian starosedeoci (the old urban families) are Slavophone, i.e. they do not speak Albanian but a Slavic dialect (“naš govor” - our tongue) at home. During the 1921 census, the great majority of Muslim Albanians in Orahovac was therefore registered under the category ‘Serbs or Croats’ (Krasnici 1957:121-122 and 125). During my own research, some of them told me that their tongue is similar to Macedonian rather than Serbian (it is clear they want to dissociate themselves from everything Serbian). It is likely that they are the last remnants of what is known in Serbian sources as Arnautaši, Islamicized and half-way Albanianized Slavs. At the end of the nineteenth century Branislav Nušić wrote that many (Serbian speaking) poturice in Orahovac begin to talk Albanian, because they started to marry Albanian women (Nušić 1902:25). Hadži-Vasiljević confirms this, while he also claims that during his visit to Orahovac (in World War One) he was unable to distinguish Orthodox from Islamicized and Albanianized Serbs. They spoke the same language and wore the same costumes, some claiming that they were Serbs, and others that they were Albanians or Turks (1939:123,141). Another interesting aspect of the local Serb-Albanian symbiosis is that Serbian families consider themselves to be part of one or another Albanian tribe or clan (Krasnici 1957:123).
Some mentally retarded children — their faces showing ignorance, surprise and amusement with the scene they are subjected to — are kept in check by their mothers who try to push them down under the altar. This ritual is generally considered to be most effective during the night, even more so if priests and nuns are singing, and therefore the church’s altar is surrounded and occupied by pilgrims throughout the night. In addition, some pilgrims carry metal plates on their heads, sometimes wrapped in scarves, meant to heal headaches and other diseases thought to be located in the head. Other pilgrims keep this kind of plates on other parts of the body (legs, arms, heart region, or mouth) for similar purposes. In return, pilgrims bring pieces of cloth and towels, and chickens, sheep and lambs with them as gifts to the monastery. The animals are carried a couple of times around the church before they are brought to the collection point.

While in 1991 Albanians boycotted the pilgrimage, Gypsies were present in quite substantial numbers. These Gypsies are mostly Orthodox or ‘Serbian’ gypsies (Srpski cigani) from Suva Reka and Orahovac who seem to be quite well assimilated into the Serbian community. Unlike the Gračanica sabor, which attracts many more people and is therefore much more crowded and anonymous, Serbs and Gypsies intermingle in Zočište apparently knowing each other quite well. While I was present, there was also a smaller but quite conspicuous presence of Muslim Gypsy women, wearing the characteristic wide baggy trousers and speaking Albanian, who hardly joined in with Serbs and Orthodox Gypsies; obviously they were not part of the Orthodox communitas developing within the walls of the monastery.

Although this was meant to be a feast, the atmosphere was quite tense during my visit: the war had just started and (as a Dutchman) I sensed a great deal of suspicion (at a time when the Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans van den Broek, was heading the European Community efforts to stop the war in former Yugoslavia). At dawn shots were fired, probably by some drunken Serbs, and later that morning army jets flew over, as a reminder to everyone that the situation was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a local peasant of being an Albanian ‘spy’, because of his local dialect, which sounded to him like an Albanian speaking Serbian. After the poor peasant

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8 In Orahovac, Gypsies living in the ‘Gypsy’ mahala (called Stolići) are regarded as ‘Serbs’ (Krasnič 1957: 99).
showed his ID to his fellow Serb from Prizren he was told jokingly, but not without serious overtones, “You had better change your language if you want us to become friends”.

Deep distrust is characteristic for the Serb community in Kosovo. After many years of political unrest and ethnic tension, Kosovo Serbs have developed a strong sense of suspicion or even outright paranoia against anybody who appears not to be ‘one of us’. During my visit to Zociste I hardly met any ordinary Serbian pilgrims who were willing to speak to me, except for a deeply religious woman from Prizren, daughter of a prominent Serb partisan fighter and post-war communist, and herself an admirer of both Tito and Milošević. She explained to me that many Serbs in Kosovo lock themselves up in their houses. Her elder brother, for whom she went on pilgrimage to Zociste, was suffering from paranoia and schizophrenia: he constantly heard voices and did not dare to join her (which he direly needed in her eyes) because police and army would try to prevent him at all cost, at least that is what he thought. He slept on the kitchen floor, locking himself up at night. She herself thought Albanians to be non-believers —Islam was not a religion— and to embody the devil himself. Since 1981, one year after Tito’s death, she said, they have tried to realise their evil plans to destroy Yugoslavia, and they have managed to infect Croats and Slovenes as well.

The highpoint of the sabor in Zociste is the litija, a procession three times around the church on the morning of 14 July, headed by priests and flagbearers who carry Serbian flags and a banner with an image of the two patron saints. Most Gypsies remain at the side, which again shows that the major religious ceremonies at occasions like these are usually not ‘mixed’. After the procession priests bless the table with kolače (holy bread), žito (wheat), candles and wine, and women start to serve pilgrims with wheat and bonboni (sweets), as well as glasses of rakija (brandy), congratulating those present on the feast day of the church. In front of the church, pilgrims queue to be blessed by the priests and to receive part of the holy bread, whereas at the other side of the porta people push each other aside to get a bottle of holy water.

During my visit to Zociste it was clear to me that this pilgrimage, in this particular location and point in time, was primarily to be interpreted as a demonstration of Serb presence in Kosovo amidst a ‘sea’ of Albanians. Since the start of the 1990s, the Serbian Orthodox Church (especially the head of the Raška-Prizren diocese, Bishop Artemije) has been trying to revive ecclesiastical life in Kosovo, particularly monasticism: in Zociste, some new guestrooms have
been added to the monastery, and in 1991 the monastery, which was until then manned by only one monk (at present the abbot), was rejuvenated with three young monks. These local activities have been part of a much wider 'offensive' by the Serbian Orthodox Church to strengthen its presence in Kosovo, among other things through the building of new churches, the most prestigious project being the construction of a huge Orthodox cathedral in Priština. The recent war, however, has deeply affected the Serbian Orthodox church in Kosovo, particularly in Zočište: On 21 July 1998, the monastery of Zočište was taken by the Kosovo Liberation Army, the first Albanian attack on a Serbian Orthodox monastery. According to Serbian sources, the Albanians are said to have claimed the monastery as belonging originally to the Albanian Orthodox church. Seven monks and a nun, as well as a few dozen Serb citizens who had taken shelter in the monastery, were taken hostage. Although they were later released, the monastery remained under Albanian control for several weeks, until it was retaken by Serbian forces.⁹

Unrest in the Ostrog Monastery

The Ostrog Monastery (Monastir Ostrog), not far from the Montenegrin town of Nikšić, has been visited by Muslims from time immemorial. Here one finds the relics of Sveti Vasili Ostroški, who is worshipped by people throughout the southern parts of former Yugoslavia. Before the war in Yugoslavia started, on important holidays the monastery was visited by pilgrims from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Kosovo. In a more distant past, even Muslim pilgrims from Albania travelled to this shrine. The famous Balkan traveller Edith Durham, who witnessed a pilgrimage on Pentecost in the early years of this century, wrote that thousands of Christians, as well as Bosnian and Albanian Muslims, gathered here in perfect concord (Durham 1904:40-41).

However, in 1988, Muslim pilgrims from Kosovo seem to have caused problems in Ostrog, at least according to some press reports which were published at that time in Belgrade.\(^\text{10}\) These reports need to be treated with caution, as they were published at the height of a strong Serbian propaganda campaign against Albanians, but they are nevertheless worth looking at. According to these reports, the main culprits for the unrest in Ostrog were dervishes, members of Muslim brotherhoods which enjoy wide popularity among Albanians (on this subject see chapter 4). They were accused of rowdyism, especially on non-holidays: the Orthodox monks who guard the shrine stated that dervishes had thrown stones at them and even threatened them with guns. Contrary to the monastic rules, the monks said, they sacrificed animals and performed Islamic ceremonies on the monastery ground.

In an article that appeared in *Ekspres Politika* (26 June 1988), the iguman (prior) Georgije Mirković, the custodian of the relics of Saint Vasili, stated that dervishes regularly come to Ostrog in groups of twenty to thirty persons to perform their ceremonies. With their immodest and unruly behaviour they disturbed the peace in this place of worship and scared other visitors, so the iguman stated to the journalist. In an article published two weeks later in *Intervju* (8 July 1988), the story of dervishes attacking Ostrog is further embroidered with claims that they threatened the iguman with a gun and sung a *mevlud*\(^\text{11}\), all of which was allegedly aimed at expelling the monks and Islamicizing the Ostrog monastery. To make matters even worse, the priest said, some dervishes had deposited their excrement in the clean bed linen of the guest rooms, and had spilled a liquid at the entrance of the monastery which spread a terrible stench.

In these articles it was claimed that these were Albanian dervishes from Kosovo: the monks of the Ostrog monastery accused Albanian sheikhs of intending to turn the monastery into a tekija (lodge of a dervish order, *teqe* in Albanian) or a mosque and to expel the monks. The intended Islamicization of Ostrog was said to coincide with territorial aims of Albanian nationalists. Yet information on the incidents in Ostrog was inconsistent, as the statements of the


\(^{11}\) A *mevlud* is a song in praise of Mohammed’s birthday, in the above mentioned article wrongly spelled as *melvut*. 
monks in question and their superiors contradicted each other. In the Belgrade-based newspaper *Politika* (12 June 1988), the Serbian journalist Dragomir Bečirović put the accusations into a different perspective. The higher-ranking clergy, in particular the abbot of the Ostrog monastery who resides in Donji Manastir, some three kilometres away, and the metropolit (bishop) of Cetinje unmistakably played the problems down. The purport of this article is that the monks had exaggerated their complaints, in order to sound an alarm about serious personnel problems in the monastery.\(^\text{12}\) Furthermore, the text indicates that these ‘dervishes’ were probably not Albanians but Gypsies. In any case, the organisation of sheikhs in Kosovo flatly denied any responsibility for the conflict at Ostrog; indeed the charges brought against them seem to have been largely unfounded (see also chapter 4).

It seems clear that the monks of the Ostrog monastery worded their complaints in this way to achieve the maximum effect in a time of anti-Albanian frenzy. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that they felt genuinely intimidated by Muslim pilgrims. Under circumstances of structural understaffing, the unannounced presence of large groups of Muslims, and the display of ‘unorthodox’ (Muslim or whatever) ritual, can give rise to tensions, especially if the custodians of the shrine feel that they are losing control over the sanctuary to Muslims (all the more if these Muslims are believed to be headed by their own religious leaders). At Gračanica things have been different as far as my observations go: there were no Muslim leaders present and the Gypsies refrained from ostentatious ritual behaviour *en group*. It is especially these elements which are felt to pose a threat to the position and authority of those who are in control of a devotional regime, and to the religious ‘signature’ of the shrine.

\(^{12}\) The problems were closely linked with the drastic decline in the number of active monks and priests within the Serbian Orthodox church at large, which has affected Montenegro most. The Orthodox diocese of Cetinje (Montenegro) has had huge problems with recruiting personnel. In the 1980s, it had by far the lowest proportion of priests of all dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox church.
Ambiguous sanctuaries and dervish orders

Although the 'Islamicization' of Ostrog seems to be largely invented, the usurpation of Christian sanctuaries by dervish orders was not an uncommon practice in this parts of the Balkans. In the past, dervish orders, one of the driving forces behind Islamicization in the region, annexed and Islamicized numerous local Christian sanctuaries, often without provoking any serious conflict. In the course of this process, they transformed and incorporated Christian popular devotions. In addition, they created new saints' cults, based on Muslim saints. However, Islamicized shrines often acquired an ambiguous aspect because they continued to attract Christian pilgrims who went on worshipping the old Christian saints there. Some Christian sanctuaries, in particular the larger ones administered by Christian priests, were more resistant to Islamicization, but they too became ambiguous as a result of the increasing influx of Muslim pilgrims, who carried on the traditions of their Christian ancestors.

The ordinary believers, Christians and Muslims alike, did not care whether the saints they worshipped were in fact Muslim or Christian. The saints in question simply had a reputation as wonder-workers able to bring about miraculous healings or fulfil other wishes. Christians even called upon authentic dervish saints for help, and put aside all their religious prejudices in the event of dire need. As Hasluck remarks, the animosity that exists in theory between Christians and Muslims was hardly relevant to the case of popular devotion. In his monumental work Christianity and Islam under the Sultans (1929), published after his death, Hasluck characterised the almost symbiotic relationship between the different confessional groups (Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics) in the Ottoman Empire as follows: “Practically any of the religions of Turkey may share the use of a sanctuary administered by another, if this sanctuary has a sufficient reputation for beneficent miracles, among which miracles of healing play a dominant part” (Hasluck 1929:68-69).

For instance, sanctuaries administered by Christian priests which had a good reputation as places of healing could count on considerable interest from Muslims. This meant that after a while, they could become susceptible to claims made by sheikhs or other Muslim leaders, which in turn led to conflicts in which the control over the sanctuaries was at stake. It was not the ordinary pilgrims who stirred up these conflicts, but religious leaders. As Hasluck put it:
"It is (...) important to remark that (...) frequentation of Christian sanctuaries by Moslems does not seem to imply any desire on the part of the Moslem population to usurp the administration of the sanctuary in question. Participation is in normal circumstances sufficient for them, and they are perfectly content to leave Christian saints in the hands of Christian priests. Usurpation comes from the organised priesthood or the dervish orders, who, in the event of successful aggression, stand to gain both in prestige and materially" (Hasluck 1929:69).

The instigators were thus religious leaders who wanted to gain control over the sanctuaries as sources of power and income. Whether they were successful depended on the political circumstances, which tend to favour one religious regime over another. In Albania and the southern parts of the former Yugoslavia, the dervish orders benefitted from Ottoman political hegemony, and many sanctuaries fell into their hands. Afterwards, during the Balkan wars, when the geo-political situation in the Balkans changed dramatically, a number of Muslim sanctuaries were (re-)Christianized or dismantled. These processes of Islamicization and subsequent Christianization of ambiguous shrines as a result of political changes can best be illustrated by the history of the Bektashi order in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo.

**The Bektashi Order and Sari Saltuk**

At the end of the eighteenth century the Bektashi order became the most influential and popular dervish order in Albania.\(^\text{13}\) With the help of autonomous Albanian pashas the order grew and gained a strong hold on the population, particularly in southern Albania and western Macedonia. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the order developed into a virtually independent religious community and became one of the cornerstones of the Albanian national movement.

\(^{13}\) For general information on the Bektashi order, see: Birge (1937). Hasluck (1929) is an important source with respect to the history of this order in Albania (see also Norris 1993:123-137). Recently Nathalie Clayer published a book on the dervish orders of Albania, which is largely devoted to the Bektashi order (Clayer 1990). She succeeded in constructing a detailed historical overview out of a large number of dispersed and incomplete sources. It is by far the best study available on this subject.
It called on the Albanians to put aside their confessional differences, presenting itself as a force of national unity, bridging the gap between Muslims and Christians. This national propaganda enabled the order to increase its following and extend its influence into northern Albania and Kosovo. According to Hasluck, the Albanian Bektashis even hoped to establish a state of their own (1929:438). One of the order’s means of achieving religious supremacy was to gain control over Christian sanctuaries and manipulate the veneration of saints.

The order tried to take over Christian sanctuaries by identifying popular Christian saints with Muslim ones, which were then superimposed. The Muslim saint usually shared external and hagiographic characteristics with the Christian counterpart, and was thus presented as a superior reincarnation of the Christian predecessor. Sometimes the identification was based on superficial similarities, such as a resemblance in name (Kissling 1962:56-57). The most important Bektashi saint to serve this function was undoubtedly Sari Saltuk. This legendary saint is said to have spread Islam in the Balkans as far back as the thirteenth century, long before the arrival of the Ottomans. During his wanderings, he wrapped himself in a Christian habit, that of St Nicholas who was very popular with Balkan Christians. Sari Saltuk was also identified with dragon legends, which can be traced back to the legend of St George. Among Albanians, Gypsies and the Slavic population of these regions, St George is a celebrated saint: his saint’s day, known as Djurdjevdan, is a major religious holiday, celebrated by Christians and Muslims alike.

Almost all tyrbe-s (mausoleums) of Sari Saltuk were connected with the Bektashi order. These sanctuaries had a markedly ambiguous character and were visited by both Muslims and Christians. In some cases, the Bektashi order seems to have succeeded in completely transforming a Christian saint’s cult into a Sari Saltuk cult. A mountain near Kruja (Albania), where one of the tyrbes of Sari Saltuk was located, was probably once a Christian place of pilgrimage, dedicated to St Spiridion (Kaleshi 1971:821). In other cases, the transformation was incomplete or had been brought to a halt. These tyrbe-s remained under Christian administration.

Sveti Naum, for instance, a small Christian Orthodox monastery at Lake Ohrid, was claimed by

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14 Judging from the older ethnographic literature, there were at least ten tyrbe-s of Sari Saltuk in Albania and Kosovo. The original number was undoubtedly much higher. For instance in the vicinity of Gjakova (Kosovo) alone, four tyrbe-s of this saint can still be found.
Albanian Bektashis to be one of the tombs of Sari Saltuk. Every year massive Bektashi pilgrimages took place there. The Greek Orthodox church of St Spiridion, on the island of Corfu off the Albanian coast, is a similar example. The tomb of the Christian saint Spiridion, patron saint of Corfu, was regarded as a major tomb of Sari Saltuk by the Albanian Bektashis. This tomb was similarly a destination for annual pilgrimages by Albanian Bektashi dervishes and sheikhs (Hasluck 1929:583-584). There is no information available as to the extent to which the order used these pilgrimages as an opportunity to campaign for the annexation of these sanctuaries, but it is almost certain that religious propaganda by the order encouraged Muslim pilgrimage (Hasluck 1929:70). It also seems likely that this provoked conflicts with the Christian clergy stationed in these shrines.

In its efforts to gain control over Christian sanctuaries, the Bektashi order was supported by Albanian pashas. The most illustrious among them was Ali Pasha (1790-1822), who exploited the organisation and religious doctrine of the Bektashis to win popular support for his government, widen his political influence and underline his independence vis-à-vis the central Ottoman authorities. The majority of Muslims in his territory was loyal to the Bektashi order and it was held in high esteem by Christians as well. Under the political patronage of Ali Pasha the order enlarged its following considerably. One of the ways it did so was by Islamicizing Christians. In turn that helped Ali Pasha increase his power and occupy new territories. According to Hasluck, the Bektashi pilgrimage to Corfu and the identification of Sari Saltuk with St Spiridion, patron saint of the island, were probably related to Ali Pasha’s territorial ambitions to get hold of the Ionian islands (1929:439).

Although the order tried to gain control of Christian sanctuaries, it never intended to bar Christian pilgrims. On the contrary, the Bektashis encouraged Christian pilgrimages to Bektashi

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15 Sveti Naum is still a place of Muslim pilgrimage (Smith 1982:223-224).

16 Sometimes conflicts of a more violent nature arose, for instance at Shkodra (northern Albania) where the ruins of an old church served as a place of pilgrimage for both Christians and Muslims. Fanatic Muslims claimed that the ruins were a former dervish lodge and this resulted in a fierce reaction from the Catholic population. Because of this reaction, the local Ottoman authorities hesitated to comply with the demands of the Muslims (Degrand 1901: 80).
sanctuaries and tolerated the worship of Christian saints. Hasluck even claims that authentic Bektashi saints were deliberately made ambiguous by identifying them with popular Christian saints. These Bektashi saints were thus made fit for Christian ‘consumption’. There are numerous examples of this. In the huge Bektashi lodge at Tetovo (Macedonia), Christians worshipped St Elias (Hasluck 1929:582). The renowned Bektashi sanctuary atop Mount Tomor (Albania) was the destination of a Marian pilgrimage (Bartl 1968:107). At Kanatlarci (Macedonia), Christians visited the Bektashi lodge to worship St Nicholas (Djordjevic 1984, III:398), and in the Bektashi lodge of Aleksandrovo (Macedonia), Christians celebrated Djurdjevdan, the patron saint’s day of St George (Evans 1901:202).

The Bektashis’ motive for allowing and even encouraging Christian pilgrimages to their shrines was undoubtedly their wish to gain religious supremacy in Albania and western Macedonia. Being an important pillar of the national movement, the order aspired to religious leadership over Albanian Muslims and Christians, and its ultimate aim was to become the national Albanian church. Bektashi lodges were generally known to be centres of Albanian national activity, and many ambiguous shrines under the control of the order became breeding grounds of national unity. However, the religious ambiguity of these sanctuaries carried with it the danger that under changing political circumstances the sanctuaries might again be claimed by Christians, which was exactly what happened. After the First Balkan War, when the Ottoman Empire was almost entirely swept from European soil, several Bektashi sanctuaries were burnt down, dismantled or Christianized (cf. Elsie 1995:200-208). For instance at Martaneshi (Albania), a lodge was burnt down by the Serbian armies. As Hasluck states, “they added insult to injury by shaving the abbot’s beard” (1929:551). The Bektashi lodge at Prizren was confiscated and transformed into a Serbian orphanage (Hasluck 1929:525). The large Bektashi lodge at Tetovo was temporarily occupied by Serbian army units, which expelled or killed the dervishes (Choublier 1927:441). Under Serbian rule, a number of Bektashi sanctuaries were ‘re-Christianized’, like those in Aleksandrovo (Hasluck 1929:92) and Kišova (Hasluck 1929:524).

During these years the Bektashi order was given the final blow in what later became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (still later Yugoslavia). In Albania proper, the order recovered only partially from the devastation of war and occupation (especially by the Greeks in the south of Albania), but continued to play an important role after Albania became independent.
In 1967, however, two decades after the Communists rose to power, Enver Hoxha's Stalinist regime prohibited all forms of religious activity, and the Bektashi order completely disappeared in Albania.

I would like to conclude this chapter with the general observation that pilgrimages in the Balkans (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro) have often been characterised by a blurring of formal religious boundaries. Muslims and Christians of different ethno-religious backgrounds have visited each other's shrines, shared the veneration of certain saints and have often disregarded their priests' objections to the transgression of religious boundaries. In this borderland of two major religions, Christian and Muslim forms of pilgrimage and veneration of saints have amalgamated, in spite of the fact that different ethno-religious groups have been continuously engaged in bitter conflicts. The case of Graćanica demonstrates that religious gatherings of different ethno-religious groups need not end in conflict, as long as neither the administration and religious signature nor the cultural dominance of one group over the other becomes an issue. Serbian control over this shrine is not threatened by the presence of Muslim Gypsies, since they accept their ritually inferior position within this system of 'hierarchised pluralism' (Roux 1992). Other historical examples similarly suggest that ethno-religious differences need not be an impediment to a certain degree of communitas during pilgrimages. In the past, in Ostrog and many other places, notably Bektashi sanctuaries, Muslims and Christians of different ethnic backgrounds gathered peacefully and, as far as we know, without any serious conflict. The various groups of pilgrims found each other, literally and figuratively, in the holy space of a sanctuary and shared their awe for the supernatural powers of certain saints, regardless of the religious complexion of the saint in question. Their motives as pilgrims were the same and are probably universal: health, well-being and happiness for their close relatives and themselves.

As was illustrated by the history of shrines connected with the Bektashi order, this 'spontaneous' communitas can acquire a political and ideological function and can be manipulated by worldly and religious authorities alike. As a matter of fact, the role of these elites always makes communitas across ethnic and religious boundaries an extremely precarious matter. Because of their mixed and ambiguous nature, these pilgrimages exhibit an intrinsic tendency towards tension and conflict, especially over the religious signature of and actual control over the shrine in question. These conflicts are provoked primarily by religious and
political elites, for whom sanctuaries are a source of power and income.\textsuperscript{17} So, although these pilgrimages may help to bridge ethnic and religious differences and create a certain degree of 'shared' communal identity, they can very easily become arenas for competition and conflict between and within local communities. As it is in the nature of rituals and symbols to conceal a diversity of beliefs and reconcile opposing interests and loyalties, periods of increased tension may cause these contradictions to rise to the surface very rapidly. General political conditions and important shifts herein are of the utmost importance, constituting the background of these conflicts and determining their final outcome.

\textsuperscript{17} It is hardly surprising that conflicts over 'shared' or 'ambiguous' sanctuaries have resurfaced during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. One example is a small church near Sutomore (Montenegro), which contained an Orthodox as well as a Catholic altar piece, of which the latter was destroyed and removed from the church in 1996 (Internet Newsgroup <reg.exyugoslav> - Podgorica 5 May 1996, Press TWRA, "Altar piece in the common church in Montenegro destroyed"). One can probably find other examples in Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina as well.