Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo
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CHAPTER 6
Naim Frashëri’s Qerbelaja: Religion and Nationalism among the Albanians

I have argued previously that religion is a major factor in processes of identification in the Balkans, and in most of my chapters, which deal with cases at the grass-roots level, I have illustrated this principle. In the last two chapters I will shift the locus of attention from the local to the national level, and try to analyse the manner in which religion has influenced the ways in which the Albanian and the Serbian nations have been ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1991). In both chapters I would like to focus on the attempts of nineteenth century intellectuals and ideologists of both sides to incorporate religious elements in their respective nationalisms. As I said earlier, nationalism, even though a modern ideology, has often resorted to ‘pre-modern’ values and symbols, borrowed in particular from kinship and religion. A comparison of the development of Albanian and Serbian national ideology is particularly interesting, because in both cases there were attempts to use religious images in order to sacralise the nation, but within completely different contexts and with quite opposite results: unlike Serbian nationalism, where ethnic and religious identity have merged, Albanian nationalism nowadays lacks any strong religious attachments.

Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, there were some efforts in Albania to inject religious elements into Albanian national ideology. I am particularly referring here to the Albanian national poet Naim Frashëri, who tried to make (Shi’ite) Bektashi symbols and myths part of Albanian national discourse. More specifically, Frashëri tried to promote the Kerbela myth (see chapter 4) as a source of inspiration in the struggle against Ottoman domination, not unlike the way Serbian nationalists used the Kosovo myth. Moreover, it is interesting to see that

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1 I agree with Richard Jenkins (1997:107) that the ‘cultural stuff’ with which groups mark themselves off and define their identities is not irrelevant to an understanding of ethnic processes. See also Cora Govers & Hans Vermeulen, who note a renewed trend in ethnic studies towards the analysis of the content of ethnicity, i.e. of culture in the sense of collective representation. They have termed this shift in attention the constructionist turn in the study of ethnicity (1997:8).
both myths, the Serbian-Orthodox myth about the Battle of Kosovo and the Shi’ite myth about the Battle of Kerbela, are very similar in content and style. In both cases the plot of the story is centred around a lost battle, which makes them examples of what Elias Canetti has called ‘religions of lament’: “The legend around which they form is that of a man or a god who perishes unjustly. (...) This is the one death which should not have taken place, and the grief it arouses is beyond all measure. (...) His death is not recognised by the mourners. They want him alive again. (...) [I]n lamenting him, they feel themselves as persecuted. Whatever they have done, however they have raged, for this moment they are aligned with suffering” (Canetti 1962:143-145). Suffering, so ubiquitous in the Balkans, is an element which in one way or another has found expression in Balkan nationalism, and, unfortunately, it is all too often in the name of this suffering that new crimes are committed.

Albanian nationalism and the overcoming of religious divisions

From the beginning the Albanian national movement has been confronted with a situation of strong internal religious divisions. The Albanians in the Balkans belong to three different faiths (Islam, Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism), and if we add the Bektashis as a separate religious community—which it de facto has been—than we have a fourfold religious divide.2 Although Albanian nationalist ideology claims that religion was never important — ‘Albanianism’ being the only true faith of the Albanians— religion has caused deep divisions within Albanian society, constituting a major obstacle to national unity at the end of the nineteenth century. The threat of internal cleavages along religious lines was reinforced by the fact that many higher ecclesiastics, Albanians as well as non-Albanians, tended to define the ethnicity of their believers in terms other than Albanian, thus inhibiting the development of an Albanian national consciousness: during the

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2 Although most Albanians (80-90% of all Albanians in the Balkans) are Muslims, in Albania itself the predominance of Islam is slightly less pronounced, especially when we take into account the traditionally strong Bektashi presence. Slightly more than half of the Albanians in Albania proper are Sunni Muslims (55%), while the rest of the population is divided between Orthodox (20%), Bektashis (15%) and Catholics (10%). These figures, which are based on the 1942 census, are reproduced in Daniel (1990:2). One can safely assume that the basic proportions have remained more or less the same.
late Ottoman period, for instance, the Orthodox Albanians in the south were subjected to a process of Hellenization, while orthodox Sunni Muslims were being defined as ‘Turks’ (Peyfuss 1992).⁴

Therefore, since the nineteenth century there have been continuous attempts to neutralise the legacy of religious cleavages for the politics of Albanian national identity. Since none of the faiths was in the position to unite all Albanians on a religious platform, language became the main vehicle: the Albanian language —very distinct from the languages of its direct (Slav and Greek) neighbours— was the only factor that could bridge the differences between various religious and regional identities.³ Religion as a source of communal identity was and still is being de-emphasised systematically. In present-day Kosovo, an area where the level of religiosity of the population was above the Yugoslav average, religion is almost irrelevant in official political life (but see chapter 3). Although more than 90% of the Albanian population in Kosovo is Muslim, Islam has played no role of importance in political mobilisation, and Catholics have become as prominent members of the Albanian resistance against Serbian hegemony as their Muslim compatriots.

Because of this legacy of internal religious divisions Albanian nationalism is not clothed in religious terms, in striking contrast to Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian Muslim nationalism

³ At the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman government strictly prohibited all publications in Albanian, which explains why most Albanian books were printed abroad. Also in schools, which were virtually all maintained by clergymen, the language of instruction was usually not Albanian, but Greek (in schools run by the Greek-Orthodox Church), Italian (Catholic schools), and Turkish (Muslim schools) (see Jacques 1995:276).

⁴ Apart from the Albanian language it was hard for the Albanians to identify other markers of national identity or symbols of common history. Skenderbeg, Albania’s national hero, was probably one of the few historical figures who was sufficiently religiosity ambiguous or ‘undetermined’ to be acceptable to all. Skenderbeg (as well as his father Gjon Kastrioti) changed religious allegiances several times during his lifetime: he was baptized as a Christian, raised as a Muslim, and became again Christian on his return to Albania. Although fifteenth-century European sources celebrated him as the ‘Champion of Christianity’ fighting against the rule of Islam, nineteenth-century Albanian intellectuals saw him mainly as the figure who liberated Albanians from foreign domination. They pushed the religious (Christian) component of his resistance to the background (see Jacques 1995:236; Logoreci 1977:30-31; Skendi 1980; Skendi 1956:313-314).
which have clear religious overtones. From the beginning, Albanian nationalists have propagated a kind of ‘civil religion’ of Albanianism, which was epitomised in Pashko Vasa’s famous O moj Shqypni (‘Oh poor Albania’), one of the earliest and most influential nationalist poems in Albanian literature, published in 1879-1880 (Faensen 1980:148-151; Elsie 1995:258-267). The author, who was of north Albanian Catholic background, lamented the fate of Albania, divided as it was along the lines of competing ethno-religious affiliations.

Albanians, you are killing each other, You are divided into a hundred factions, Some say: “I believe in God”, others: “I in Allah”; Some: “I am a Turk”, others: “I am Latin” Some say: “I am Greek”, others: “I am Slav”, But you are all brothers, you miserable people! Priests and hoxhas have deceived you In order to divide you and to keep you poor. Shqyptar, me vllazën jeni t’u vra, Ndër një qind çëta jeni shpërda; Sa thon kam fe, sa thon kam din, Njeni: jam turk, tjëtri: latin Do thon: jam grek, shkje disa tjerë, Por jenë vllazën t’gjith more t’mjer! Priuñit e hoxhët ju kan hutue, Për me ju da e me ju vorfime.

Later on he compares his country to a mother and a zoj e rand (grand lady), which has been raped and defiled by foreigners. Through this gendered image of the Albanian nation, and an appeal to the patriarchal values and manly virtues of Albanian men, he calls upon them to undo this disgrace. Again, towards the end of his poem he summons the Albanians to forget about their religious differences:

Awaken, Albanians, wake from your slumber, Let us all, as brothers, swear an oath, Not to mind church or mosque, The faith of the Albanians is Albanianism! Çonju, Shqyptar, prej gjumiç çonju, të gjith si vllazën n’ñji bes shërëmgonju, e mos shikjoni kish a xhamija; feja e Shqyptarit asht shqyptarija!

The need to bury religious differences is a recurring theme in the literature of the Albanian Rilindja (Rebirth) era, especially around the turn of the century. Many prominent Albanian patriots of

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5 The merger of religious and national identity can be seen in most of South-Eastern Europe, in orthodox countries like Greece and Serbia (cf. Ramet 1988), as well as in Catholic Croatia and Slovenia (Mojzes 1995)

6 The Albanian original as well as a translation into English is provided by Elsie (1995:263-267). My translation is based on Elsie’s, with some slight alterations.
different religious background expressed this idea in some way or another (Maliqi 1997:122). For instance after the annexation of Kosovo by the Serbs in 1912, in his poem ‘The Voice of the Flag’, the well-known Albanian poet Asdreni called upon the Albanians “to end their religious quarrels and unite in order to save what remained of the country” (Mann 1955:58). This obsession with religious discord shows that confessional differences certainly mattered in Albania, in spite of the dominant Albanian discursive image that religious fanaticism or intolerance were less profound than in other parts of the Balkans. For several centuries, religion had been the primary source of identification, and although nationalist rhetoric declared it to be unimportant (and religious fanaticism to be alien to the Albanian soul), reality on the ground was sometimes quite different.

The case of the martyrs of Stubla is an obvious example of where these divisions could lead. Throughout the nineteenth century, Muslims in Kosovo had a reputation of being quite conservative and fanatic, a phenomenon which cross-cut the ethno-national lines of division. Cases of religious violence against Catholic Albanians were noted by Edith Durham in her book *High Albania*, particularly near the town of Gjakova (Djakovica) (1985:246-248). Even though Albanian Catholics are nowadays taking an active part in the Albanian resistance against Serbian rule, the relations between Catholics and Muslims have not always been friendly. Because of their ‘atypical’ religious identity, the Catholic Albanians have occupied a distinctive, and sometimes intermediate social and ethno-political position between the Muslim Albanian majority and the Christian Orthodox Serbs. Even today Catholics rarely marry Muslims, and some of them are deeply suspicious of their Muslim compatriots, a feeling which is mixed with fear of Islamicization or homogenisation of the Kosovo Albanians along religious lines.

In (proto-)ethnographic sources (mostly dating from the turn of the century) there are many other instances to be found of religious divisions among Albanians, which present-day Albanian historiography tends to ignore. Even a cursory look at these sources provides ample proof of religiously motivated tensions, particularly in the towns, where religious leaders tended to guard orthodoxy and orthopraxy most strictly (Bartl 1968:94-95). Only in the tribal regions of northern Albania did religious divisions seem to play a minor role. There religious conflict only occurred between tribes of different religious background. The religious divide was secondary to the tribal distinction (Bartl 1968:96). But in the rest of Albania, religious difference counted. Apart from the Albanian-Slav and Albanian-Greek frontiers (in Kosovo, Macedonia, and
northern Epirus), where ethnic and religious difference overlapped, religious intolerance also existed between Albanians themselves: well-known examples are the Sunni hostility towards the Bektashis in southern Albania, and the animosity between Catholics and Muslims in the north, as in the town of Shkodra.

Hyacinthe Hecquard, French consul in Shkodra in the middle of the nineteenth century, gives a vivid picture of the tensions that existed between conservative Muslims and Catholics in Shkodra, which was the largest town in Albania at that time. “Oppressed because of their fanaticism, or possibly fanatical because of their oppression, the Catholics of Shkodra seem to have been singled out for grievous measures. They were forbidden to build a wall around the cemetery. Situated as it was outside the city, Muslim hoodlums delighted in enraging the Catholics by breaking or overturning the headstones, sometimes even exhuming dead bodies. The intimidated Christians did not dare to make complaints, and the government took no punitive measures” (Hecquard 1858:340, translation by Jacques 1995:212). Until 1857 the market day was on Sunday, forcing Christians to open shops or buy provisions on their holy day, because local Muslims opposed the change to another day. Only in 1857 was the market day altered to Wednesday (Hecquard 1858:327-28; 337).

Bartl (1968:39-40) mentions several other contemporaries of Hecquard, who tell similar stories about Shkodra: until the middle of the nineteenth century local Catholic priests were not allowed to wear priestly garb, and the Catholic congregation did not possess a church. The town was divided into twelve Muslim and two Catholic mahalla-s (quarters), and it was especially during Ramadan, when Muslims Albanians were irritated by seeing Christians looking fat and well fed, that fights between them occurred, as the British consul in Shkodra Wadham Peacock wrote (1914:118-120). On the national level, the question of the Albanian alphabet provides a good example of the way religious divisions inhibited the attainment of national unity; after the much-debated choice of the Latin alphabet (1908) strong opposition arose from conservative Muslims who were in favour of the ‘Turkish’ (i.e. the Arabic) script (Skendi 1960; Peyfuss 1992:132).

For other examples of clashes between Muslims and Catholics in Shkodra see Jacques (1995:220).
It is, however, also clear that the national issue slowly began to supersede religious differences. New ‘ethnic’ cleavages emerged, especially within the religious communities, for instance within the Greek-Orthodox community: in southern Albania, growing tensions between the Greek hierarchy and nationally minded Orthodox Albanian priests led to violence (Ramet 1998:205-206). On the other hand, religious differences lost some of their importance among the Albanians. In Shkodra, the rift between Catholics and Muslims proved not to be as deep as between (Albanian) Catholics and (Slav) Orthodoxes. In spite of their common Christianity, Albanians and Slavs despised each other more (Jacques 1995:230). Also during the period of the League of Prizren (1878-1881), Albanian Muslims and Catholics worked closely together in the Shkodra committee (Bartl 1968:118).^8

The most radical attempt to eradicate religion from the political arena occurred under Communism. Enver Hoxha took Pashko Vasa’s motto (‘The faith of the Albanians is Albanianism’) literally and made Albania the first ‘atheist’ state in the world. Under his regime, the fight against religious divisions evolved into a fight against religion per se, aiming at replacing the allegiances to various religious communities with one undivided loyalty to the Party. “The regime continuously emphasised that Catholicism, Islam and Orthodoxy were alien philosophies introduced into Albania by foreign elements which essentially threatened the integrity of the nation. Priests and muftis were ridiculed as backward relics of the past, easily recruited as agents of foreign powers to undermine Albanian nationalism” (Vickers & Pettifer 1997:98). Finally, in 1967, the Albanian communists prohibited all religious practices, closing down numerous churches and mosques, and transforming them into cinemas, sports halls or warehouses. In spite of Enver Hoxha’s radical Stalinist outlook, it was nationalism which provided the backbone of his policies: his harsh treatment of the religious communities should be seen primarily in this light (Fischer 1995:45).^9 However, not all religious communities were treated the same way: it was particularly

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^8 The rift between Muslims and Catholics has nevertheless continued to exist, even up to the present day. As Bowers notes, in 1980, only 5% of marriages in the Shkodra district were ‘mixed’ (i.e. between people of different religious background) (1983-84:129).

^9 Bernd J. Fischer stresses the nationalist character of Enver Hoxha’s regime (1995). Since national consciousness in Albania developed relatively late, Hoxha saw it as his main task to forge a nation out of population that was divided
the Catholic church which was persecuted most rigorously, whereas the attack on Islam was much more restrained (Bowers 1983-84).

After the demise of communism, faith has regained some of its importance in the lives of ordinary Albanians, to some extent reviving the old religious divisions. Intellectuals and politicians in Albania have been debating where Albania should find its main allies (in the ‘Muslim’ Middle East or in the ‘Catholic’ West), and former president Berisha’s move to make Albania a member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in December 1992 sparked much controversy (Albania withdrew again from this organisation in January 1999). A contributing factor has been the fact that Albania’s (Orthodox) neighbours tend to perceive Albanian identity not only in ethno-linguistic but also in religious terms, labelling them as a ‘Muslim’ nation, or as ‘Muslim fundamentalists’, a process which has put the secular character of Albanian identity under pressure (Draper 1997:141). Liberal Albanian intellectuals have tried to counteract these tendencies, propagating Albanian ‘ecumenism’ as the only remedy against internal religious divisions or against attempts of one particular religion (Islam) to gain political predominance. “If the emptiness that Communism left behind can be replaced by something, by some kind of national faith or conviction, then it is the creed that Albanians are a nation of ecumenism, carrying on the tradition of people like Naim Frashëri, Fan Noli and Gjergj Fishta”, as Shkëlzen Maliqi writes (1997:122).

Naim Frashëri’s attempts to blend Albanian nationalism with the Bektashi doctrine

In spite of the continuous efforts to neutralise religion, it is interesting to note that there have nevertheless been attempts to give this Albanian ‘ecumenism’ a firm religious basis. I am particularly thinking of the attempts of Albania’s national poet Naim Frashëri (1846-1900) to promote the Bektashi order as the religious pillar of an emerging Albanian national movement. He by linguistic, religious, tribal and other ‘traditional’ allegiances. The Albanian scholar Arshi Pipa is even more outspoken: “Hoxha was decisive in producing a cultural atmosphere totally dominated by a doctrinaire propaganda exalting nationalism. Linguistics, literature, history, geography, folklore, and ethnology have been cultivated, not only to give the people a sense of their own past, but also to spread and inculcate xenophobia, slavophobia, isolationism, ethnic compactness, and linguistic uniformity” (quoted in Fischer 1995:47-48).
hoped that the heterodox and syncretist Bektashis could eventually supersede religious divisions in Albania and bridge the differences between Islam and Christianity. Naim Frashëri seemed to believe that only a bond of a religious nature could forge unity among the Albanians, an idea he shared with many other Balkan nationalists of his time. "Without faith there is no fatherland" ("Pa fe nuk ka atdhe") a popular Albanian proverb says (Qazimi 1996:161), or "blessed is the nation that professes one and the same faith" as a Greek nationalist historian exclaimed at the end of the nineteenth century (Arnakis 1963:115). For centuries religion had been the main repository of identity in the Balkans and the primary source of loyalty, which could not just be pushed aside. Consequently, many Balkan nationalists realised that new forms of identity and political loyalty required the same religious component in order to be most effective.

Naim Frashëri was above all a nationalist, whose main aim it was to unite the Albanians, and this dominant national orientation underlines most of his literary work. Nevertheless, Naim Frashëri's religious writings should not be unduly ignored, as has happened during most of this century. In many of his works, especially in his pastoral poetry, he blended his passion for Albania’s countryside and natural beauty (so characteristic for nineteenth-century romantic nationalism) with Bektashi pantheist ideas, adding a religious and mystical flavour to the former.

10 Not only Naim but also his two brothers Abdyl and Sami Frashëri played a prominent role in the Albanian national movement. Abdyl was one of the organizers and leaders of the League of Prizren (1878-1881), and Sami became the key advocate of Albanian independence at the turn of the century. All three were members of the Bektashi sect, which set them apart from the leaders of the more conservative and traditional Sunni majority (see especially Elsie 1995:226-248, Faensen 1980:99-112, and Bartl 1968:132-140).

11 In Marxist Albanian historiography and studies of Albanian literature, Naim Frashëri’s religious sympathies are disregarded, or at best, criticized in tune with stalinist dogma (see: Shuteriqi 1983:186 and Shuteriqi 1985:289). As Norris writes, Frashëri’s Bektashi writings “have proved difficult to appraise. Indeed, from the prevailing view in Marxist Albania, they had to be dismissed as a cul-de-sac and were only redeemable by the nationalist heartbeat still detectable in the content. Even so, much of that content was out of keeping with what was viewed as positive national aspirations, and without question was incompatible with current progressive ideas and ideology” (Norris 1993:168). Nevertheless among Albanian communists there seems to have been an understanding that Bektashism had been the least damaging of all religious communities in Albania, because of its independent role and its resistance against Ottoman domination (See Clayer 1992:306-307). The religious (Muslim) dimension in Frashëri’s work has only recently become the subject of research again (Qazimi 1996).
and thus ‘sacralising’ Albania’s landscape. Even more important, however, was that in some of his works he mobilised the anti-Sunni and Shi’ite orientation of the Bektashis to express opposition to Ottoman rule, and to articulate a separate (Muslim) identity for the Albanians. He was thus trying to transmute the Bektashis’ religious doctrine into a vehicle of national aspiration. This process took place against the background of Ottoman Islamic restoration under Sultan Abdulhamid, after the Tanzimat reforms had been terminated.

Naim Frashëri’s Bektashi sympathies were evident throughout his life. He grew up in the village of Frashëri (in southern Albania), where he frequently visited the famous Bektashi monastery which later would become one of the main centres of the Albanian national movement (Clayer 1990:275-278). There he was made familiar with the Shi’ite and pantheist beliefs of the sect, and through his education he developed an interest not only in the ideas of the Western Enlightenment but also in the traditions of the Orient, especially Persian poetry. “His education made him a prime example of a late nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual equally at home in Western and Oriental civilisation” (Elsie 1995:229). After the suppression of the League of Prizren in 1881 did he begin to play a role in the activities of the Albanian national movement, quickly becoming one of its key figures together with his younger brother Sami. Naim contributed to the nationalist cause by writing patriotic poems, historical epics and textbooks for Albanian elementary schools. Most of his poetry, which was extremely popular among the very small minority of literate Albanians, was profoundly romantic in character, glorifying the natural beauties of Albania and the delights of rural existence, and expressing dislike for life in the city (a

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12 The Frashëri lodge was one of the most influential Bektashi lodges in Albania. During the League of Prizren it was a major centre of nationalist activity, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, dervishes from the Frashëri lodge went from village to village to make Albanian peasants, Muslim as well as Christian, more sensitive to the national cause (Clayer 1992:291).

13 Sami Frashëri expressed his political views most comprehensively in his manifesto Shqipëria - Ç’ka qënë, ç’ëshë e ç’dë të bëhetë (‘Albania - What was it, what is it and what will become of it’, Bucharest 1899), in which he criticized the Ottomans for equating Muslim Albanians with Turks, and attacked the Greeks for their attempts to hellenize Orthodox Albanians in the south (Sami Frashëri 1988). He proposed Albanian independence as the only way to prevent the division of the country between Slavs and Greeks (see also Baril 1968:137-140).
characteristic Naim Frashëri shared with many other nineteenth-century romanticists). As Arshi Pipa has noted, Naim Frashëri was the first to introduce Albanian shepherds and peasants to the literary scene, describing their lives in idyllic terms and ignoring the hardships that were very much part and parcel of peasant life (Pipa 1978:105-108).

As has been noted by several authors, Naim Frasheri’s writings were primarily patriotic in scope, while the religious element served to strengthen and deepen his nationalist ideals. Nevertheless, as he was a devout and religious person, Naim Frashëri hoped that Bektashism would one day become the national religion of all Albanians, bridging the religious differences between Islam and Christianity (Mann 1955:38; Elsie 1995:238). He tried to promote the Bektashi order in his Fletore e Bektashinjet, the ‘Bektashi notebook’ (1896), a “sort of religious-cum-nationalist tract” (Logoreci 1977:44) which was his most direct testimony of Bektashi beliefs primarily meant for non-Bektashi consumption (Birge 1937:171). It contains an introduction to the Bektashi faith, with an account of the religious doctrine, the organisation, the rituals and the practical ethics of the Bektashi order. Here the Kerbela theme figures prominently, for instance in Frasheri’s description of Bektashi ritual: he mentions for instance that the main Bektashi feast is the Passion of Kerbela during the first ten days of the month Muharram. From Naim Frashëri’s account it is clear that the Albanian Bektashi order’s allegiance was not with Orthodox Sunni Islam, which it saw as symbolising Ottoman domination over Albanian lands. Absent are references to the five pillars of Islam that are fundamental to Sunnite belief, and much of the prayer and almost all the fasting are centred around the tragedy at Kerbela, as Norris has noted (1993:170). The Albanian Bektashis do not observe the fast of Ramadan.

See for instance his pastoral poems Bagëti e Bujqësija, ‘Herds and Pastures’ (1886), and Luletë e verësë, ‘The Flowers of Spring’ (1890).

The first part of the Bektashi notebook was published in a German translation by Norbert Jokl (1926). For an English translation see Hasluck (1929).

See especially Norris for a comprehensive treatment of the Kerbela theme in Bektashi ritual and the writings of Naim Frashëri (Norris 1993:169-188). See Degrand (1901:233-234) for a description of this ritual in the town of Kruja, around the turn of the century.
As Stuart Mann writes, the Bektashi Notebook “was designed to attract Albanians to a liberal faith acceptable to Christians and Moslems alike, and so to remove one cause of national dissention” (Mann 1955:40). Naim Frashëri tried to capitalise on the non-sectarian and interfaith appeal of the order, and depicted it in most favourable terms. Apart from highlighting religious tolerance, he also stressed its national orientation as one of the central assets of the Bektashi doctrine: “Not only among themselves but also with all men the Bektashi are spiritual brothers. They love as themselves their neighbours, both Mussulman and Christian, and they conduct themselves blamelessly towards all humanity. But more than all they love their country and their countrymen, because this is the fairest of all virtues” (quoted in Hasluck 1929-II:556). At the end of the text, his ideal of promoting the Bektashi order as the national Church of Albania shines through in his wish for Bektashis to co-operate with eminent Albanians and local authorities and to work for the salvation of Albania, i.e. to guide the Albanians not only on their road to God, but also on their road to national unity (Clayer 1992:292). “Together with the chiefs and notables let them encourage love, brotherhood, unity, and friendship among all Albanians: let not the Mussulmans be divided from the Christians, and the Christians from the Mussulmans, but let both work together” (quoted in Hasluck 1929:526).

The Bektashis’ response

It was Frashëri’s ideal to establish an independent Bektashi order in Albania, and he seems to have put great effort in convincing Bektashi leaders of the need to form an Albanian Bektashi community, and to sever ties with the mother teqe in Turkey (Skendi 1967:123-124). He seems to have succeeded, judging from a statement by Margaret Hasluck: “Latterly in Albania the tendency has been for the local khalifehs rather than the distant Akhi Dede [in Anatolia, GD] to appoint abbots, an innovation due to the present Balkan rage for autocephalous Churches, which has so infected Albania that the Catholics of the north actually talk of disowning the supremacy
of the Pope” (Hasluck 1925:602). Apart from favouring the establishment of a separate Bektashi religious community, he also proposed purging Bektashi terminology of foreign loanwords. Instead of using the Turkish expressions *baba* and *dede*, he introduced the Albanian terms *atë* and *gjysh*, and for the term *dervish* (which is actually of Persian origin) he proposed instead an Albanian equivalent: *varfë*. As Jokl notes, his purism was mainly targeted at Turkish loanwords, whereas he did not seem to mind much about loanwords absorbed from other languages (Jokl 1926:229).

It seems that the Bektashi order was to some extent carried away by Nairn Frashëri’s plans, although there were also sheikhs who expressed reservations about too close an identification with the nationalist movement out of fear of Ottoman repercussion (Clayer 1992:286). On the whole, however, it is clear that the Bektashis accepted the national role Naim Frashëri had in mind for them. Much earlier, it had already fought for looser ties with the Ottoman centre, especially during Ali Pasha’s time (1790-1822) when it was one of his major allies (see chapter 2). The order had been officially abolished by the Ottoman authorities in 1826, which strengthened its opposition to the Ottoman state. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Albanian Bektashi lodges (often places of worship for Muslims and Christians alike) were generally known to be centres of Albanian nationalist activity. In addition, the order played a very important role in the establishment of clandestine schools and the distribution of Albanian books, also giving active support to armed nationalist bands. It is noteworthy that the Bektashis, as far as the question of the Albanian alphabet was concerned, favoured adoption of the Latin script, unlike most other Muslims who supported the adoption of the Arabic script (Clayer

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17 After Albania became independent, it was especially Zog (later King Zog) who supported the establishment of autocephalous (‘national’) churches in order to diminish foreign (especially Greek) influence (see Skendi 1982:253; Fischer 1995:37).

18 Clayer (1992), who is the best expert on the history of Albanian dervish orders, gives a detailed picture of these nationalist activities, mainly using contemporary sources.
Hasluck claims that at the time of the Young Turkish Revolution (1908), the Albanian Bektashis hoped to establish a Bektashi state in Albania (1929:438).

The prominent role of the Albanian Bektashis in the national movement led to an explosive growth of the order, though for historical reasons it never succeeded in extending its influence into the north. In the south of Albania, however, the number of lodges more than doubled between 1878 and 1912, from twenty to fifty. This remarkable growth in strength and popularity enhanced the self-consciousness of the order, which increasingly started to demarcate itself from the Turkish Bektashis and Sunni Albanians, both of which opposed Albanian independence (Clayer 1992:296). The growing independence of the Albanian Bektashis and their support for Albanian national goals expressed itself for instance in the composition of patriotic poems written in the traditional genre of Bektashi nefes (hymns), and in the cultivation of the Kerbela theme. In particular the Kerbela epics written by members of Frashëri family — the epic Hadikaja of Dalip Frashëri (1842), and the Myhtarnameja (‘Tale of Myhtar’) of Dalip’s brother Shahin Bey Frashëri (1868) — had a lasting influence. Both works described the events during the battle at Kerbela and their aftermath, and were recited during the matem ceremonies (the memorial services in honour of Husayn) in Albanian Bektashi teqes. These epics branded established (Sunni) Islam as corrupt, and equated its representatives with the main adversaries of Husayn during the Kerbela battle. Instead

Similarly, the Turkish Bektashis aligned themselves with Turkish nationalism. According to Ramsaur, they embraced the national idea and became the most ‘Turkish’ of all the dervish orders, using the vernacular and cultivating Turkish forms in their literature (1942:8; see also Birge 1937:16, 84).

In the north there were only lodges in Prizren, Gjakova and Tetova (Kalkandelen). Since Ali Pasha’s times, his rivals in the north (the Bushati and Toptani families) regarded the order with suspicion (Bektaštvo 1923:404; Jacob 1908:16-17; Ippen 1907:36; Hasluck 1914-16:120-122).

There are parallels here with the rise of the Sanusi-order in Cyrenaica (in present-day Libya) which organized opposition against Italian colonial domination some years later. See the excellent account by Evans-Pritchard (1949).

Clayer gives several examples of patriotic poems written by Bektashi sheikhs (1992:293-296).

These were not direct relatives of Naim Frashëri, although coming from the same village (Shuteriqi 1983:74). See Clayer (1992:279) for other examples of the Hadika tradition in Albanian Bektashi literature.
of stressing Muslim unity throughout the Ottoman empire, greater importance was attached to
good relations with other (Christian) Albanians. Since Dalip Frashëri’s Hadikaja is perhaps the
first and certainly the longest ‘epic’ known in Albanian literature, Kerbela had a big impact, not
only on literature, but also in the minds of the Albanians, as Norris has argued (1993:180-181). It
generated a whole new genre of national epics, and served as a model for recounting other
historical themes of national importance.

Nairn Frashëri made his major contribution to this genre with his epics Histori e Skënderbeut, ‘History of Skenderbeg’, and Qerbelaja, both published in 1898. Although the
former work became much more famous (as the first epic account of Skenderbeg’s fight against
the Ottomans written by a Muslim), some Albanians consider his Qerbelaja to be more beautiful.
The paramount theme of this epic, which contains twenty-five sections, is the lamentation of the
martyrs of Kerbela, whose death is described in great detail. Nairn Frashëri describes the
terrible thirst at the beginning of the battle, the heroism of its martyrs who are slaughtered one
after another, Husayn’s farewell to his womenfolk, his brave attack on his enemies, and his final
death and decapitation. The tragic outcome of the battle is announced in vision-like dreams,
which highlight the divinely pre-ordained nature of Husayn’s defeat. Husayn accepts his
martyrdom: out of the two options offered to him —allegiance to Yazid which will make him a
traitor, or resistance to Yazid which means he will be killed— he chooses the latter. There are
many parallels here with the Serbian Kosovo myth (discussed in the next chapter): as in Tsar
Lazar’s tribulations at Kosovo, moral victory is achieved through actual defeat, suffering and
martyrdom (Norris 1993:184). As in the Kosovo myth, the sacrifice of Husayn will lead to the
redemption for the community of believers, whose sacred duty it is to avenge his death.

24 Norris gives a very useful section-by-section summary of Nairn Frashëri’s Qerbelaja (Norris 1993:182-185).

25 As Mahmoud Ayoub’s study Redemptive Suffering in Islam (1978) shows, Shi’ite Islam puts great emphasis on
keeping the memory of this tragic event alive through epic poetry, plays, processions, commemorative services
(taziyah) and other mnemonic devices (see also Eickelman 1989:278-281). The use of very direct language and
images, the re-enactment of suffering, and the constant repetition of ideas is meant to invoke sorrow and grief
among believers, but also to arouse hatred and violent anger against those who killed Husayn. The most important
effect of these Muharrem rituals is that men and women can relive these important and dramatic events of the past.
As Ayoub puts it, through the commemoration of Husayn’s martyrdom the ‘now’ of the Shi’ite community may be
What is most interesting to us is that Naim Frashëri tried to translate this theme of Shi’ite suffering and redemption onto the national level. He was not only describing a (lost) battle in the first century of Muslim history, a battle which became the founding myth in Shi’ism, he also used it as a symbolic tool for denouncing Ottoman (and Sunni) hegemony (Shuteriqi 1983:186). He was aiming at a national poem that would appeal to all sections of society and would provide a religious source of inspiration for the struggle against Ottoman domination (Norris 1993:182). As with the nineteenth-century Serbian efforts to put the Kosovo myth at the heart of Serbian nationalist ideology, Naim Frashëri seems to have tried to promote the Kerbela myth as one of the components of Albanian national ideology. It is possible that he found his ‘inspiration’ in the Serbian example: the Kosovo myth has played an important political and ideological role from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Serbs started to stand up against Ottoman rule, and even more after the country became independent in 1878 (Ekmečić 1991).

It is evident that Naim Frashëri’s Kerbela epic had a patriotic message (much like his Skenderbeg epic): it was intended to offer a lofty example for the Albanians’ fight for independence. Throughout the work, Naim Frashëri appeals to the Albanians as a nation not to forget about Kerbela and to revere its heroes, such as in section XII where he describes the battle, and in section XVIII, where he comments on its significance:

O brother Albanians!
Come closer while crying
and mourn this death
so the light from the Lord comes to you.
Remember Kerbela!27

O vëllezrë shqiptarë!
Pa qasuni duke qarë,
dhe mbani zi këtë dite,
t’u xbresë nga Zoti dritë.
Pa kujtoni Qerbelanë!
(Frashëri 1978:201)

extended back into the past and forward into the future, and serve thus as a strong basis for identity and cohesion (1978:148). In the Shi’ite worldview it is a cosmic event around which history revolves, a universal drama which transcends the confines of time, space and human imagination (1978:145). The parallels with the Kosovo myth (and the so-called Virdovdan cult) are striking (see next chapter).

26 See also Shuteryqi (1983:186), and Shuteryqi (1985:289).

27 Thanks to Vjollca Henci who translated these (and following) verses.
At the very end of his epic, in sections XXIV and XXV, he turns fully towards national issues, urging the Albanians to love their nation and country, to learn their own language which is given by God, and to become brothers and friends.

Come close, Albanians  
let God bring luck  
let us be brothers  
let us be friends  
we are all of the same seed  
we are not divided  
we are all brothers  
and have one soul and one heart  
we all live with one hope  
and we all have one faith.

Pa qasuni, Shqipëtarë,  
Zot’i math e sjelltë mbarë,  
të zëmë vëlázërinë,  
mirësin’ e miqësinë,  
jemi të gjithë një farë,  
e nukë jemi të ndarë,  
vëllezrë të tërë jemi,  
 një shpjirt e një zënërë kemi,  
gjithë rrojmë me një shpresë,  
dhe kemi gjithë një besë.  
(Frashëri 1978:274-75)

He closes his epic in this undeniably nationalist fashion, linking the tragic events in Kerbela with the tribulations of the Albanians under Ottoman rule, cursing contemporary Yazid-s and Muavija-s for Albania’s enslavement and suffering, and calling upon the Albanians to find inspiration in the events of Kerbela in order to challenge Turkish domination.

O God, for the sake of Kerbela,  
for Hasan and Husayn  
for the sake of the twelve Imams  
who suffered as they did whilst they lived,  
for all that suffering  
for my deepest sadness  
Do not let Albania fall nor perish.  
Rather let it remain for ever and ever

Zoth i math! për Qerbelanë!  
për Hysejn’ e për Hasanë!  
për ata të dymbëdhjetë!  
që hoq’n’ajqë keq në jetë!  
për gjithë ato mundime!  
për gashërimënë t’ime!  
Shqipërinë mos e lërë,  
të prishëtë e të bjerë (...)  
(Frashëri 1978:288)

Naim Frashëri’s failure

In spite of his efforts to reframe Albanian national suffering in Shi’ite terms, Naim Frashëri’s attempt had little impact. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, the Qerbelaja myth had only a direct appeal to a small (Bektashi) minority of the population, and even there the myth
was not part of any long folk tradition as was for instance the case with the Kosovo songs of the Serbs. Qerbelaja was much more the product of literary activity, or ‘invention’, than the Kosovo myth. Secondly, the attempts by Naim Frashëri and the Bektashi order to promote the order as the ‘national’ church of Albania also failed because the Bektashis were in a much weaker position as a religious minority than was the Serbian Orthodox church, even though the Bektashi sect had a greater aura of nationalist respectability than any other religious community in Albania. Thirdly, one should bear in mind that it was not Naim Frashëri’s first priority to promote the Bektashi order as such but to propagate religious tolerance. The Bektashi order offered the most appropriate vehicle for that. In spite of their popularity, however, the Bektashis were unable to erase existing religious divisions and to counteract the resilience of other, more powerful, religious communities. Then during the Balkan Wars and the First World War, the Bektashis suffered heavily from the destruction of war, a shock which took the order much effort to overcome.

After Albania received independence, religious divisions in Albanian society were played down in the name of common ethnicity. Albanian identity became profoundly non-religious in character (although the notion of ‘suffering’ remained an important element in nationalist ideology), and Albania became one of the few states in the Balkans with a strong secular character; no official state religion was proclaimed. Nevertheless, the Bektashi order continued to be one of the main pillars of the Albanian national movement. In the 1920s, it introduced ‘patriotic’ elements into its ritual, such as the use of the Albanian flag during religious ceremonies, and the use of Albanian as the official language of the Bektashi faith (Clayer 1992:303). Finally, in 1932, the Bektashi order was recognised as a *de facto* independent religious community, a sign of recognition of the important national role it had played.

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28 The adoption of the Skenderbeg myth, which was also a literary invention, shows that such a project can nevertheless succeed. In Albania there were no songs about Skenderbeg, they existed only among the Albanians in Italy (Skendi 1982:250-251).

29 Between 1913 and 1916, the majority of Albanian lodges (about forty lodges), were destroyed, i.e. looted and burnt by Greek troops, and many Bektashis fled from Albania. It is worth mentioning that the Orthodox population in southern Albanian tried to protect Bektashi babas from Greek persecution (Clayer 1992:297).