

The Influence of Islam on Albanian Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Islam on Albanian culture. The Islamization process of the Albanian culture was very crucial for the Albanians themselves as it gave them a new identity, which they lacked since their settlement on the Adriatic shores. According to history, Albanians, the biggest Muslim nation dwelling in the Balkans, South-East of Europe, are believed to be the descendents of the ancient Illyrians, who settled in Europe around 2500 years ago. They lived a social life based on tribalism, where every tribe had established its own cultural system and way of life. Thus, their cultural differences disallowed them to unite. Such situation did not change, even when Christianity was introduced to them. Because, Christianity came to Albania through two great dominations: Christian Catholics of Vatican (the Northern part of Albania) and Christian Orthodox of Greece (the Southern part of Albania). The continuous religious and political suppression faced by the Albanians from their Byzantine and Latin masters enabled them to be the first people of the Balkans, who welcomed openheartedly the Ottoman Muslims and embraced Islam as their new way of life in the 15th century. The study focuses on the following issues: (1) Historical background of Albania and Albanians; (2) The genesis of Albanian culture; and (3) The process of integration between Islamic culture and Albanian culture. This research attempts to provide important findings, which will be very helpful to the Muslims and others.

Abstrak

Karya ini mengkaji pengaruh Islam terhadap budaya Albania. Proses pengislaman budaya Albania adalah amat penting kepada orang-orang Albania sendiri kerana ia telah memberi mereka suatu identiti baru yang mereka kekurangan sejak penempatan mereka di pesisiran Adriatic. Menurut sejarah, Albania adalah negara Islam terbesar di Balkan, Selatan- Timur Eropah, dan dipercayai keturunan purba Illyrians, yang menetap di Eropah sekitar 2500 tahun yang lalu. Mereka hidup berdasarkan fahaman berpuak dimana setiap suku telah menubuhkan sistem budaya dan cara hidup yang berlainan. Oleh kerana perbezaan budaya mereka, mereka tidak diberi peluang untuk bersatu. Situasi ini tidak berubah, walaupun agama Kristian diperkenalkan kepada mereka. Ini kerana, agama Kristian datang ke Albania menerusi dua penguasaan besar: Kristian Katolik Vatican (bahagian Utara Albania) dan Kristian Ortodoks Yunani (bahagian Selatan Albania). Penindasan agama dan politik yang berterusan dan dihadapi oleh Albania daripada ketua-ketua Byzantine dan Latin mereka, membolehkan mereka menjadi orang pertama di kawasan Balkan yang mengalu-alukan Muslim-muslim Uthmaniyyah dan memeluk agama Islam sebagai cara hidup baru mereka di abad ke-15. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada isu-isu berikut: (1) Latar

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belakang sejarah Albania dan orang-orangnya; (2) asal-usul budaya Albania; dan (3) proses integrasi antara budaya Islam dan budaya Albania. Kajian ini mencoba untuk menyediakan penemuan-penemuan penting yang akan sangat membantu Umat Islam dan juga lain-lain.

Introduction

The concept of *Culture*¹ is a very basic mechanism to human societies because it provides for them their identity, system of belief as well as their moral values enabling them to act accordingly. The most important element of culture that helps people to build their worldview about the reality is *ethos*, which refers to apprehended beliefs within a cultural group that guide social interactions, i.e., independence vs. interdependence; individual rights vs. honor and protection of family; egalitarianism vs. authoritarianism; control and dominance vs. harmony and defense.² In other words, one's culture values become one's paradigm, defining what is real and right.

One's culture identity that is constructed on all the above mentioned values refers to the broad sense of cultural belongingness and shared values derived from (1) group membership, (2) a common history, (3) tradition and (4) language. Also, it focuses on shared behavior, symbols, values or beliefs.³ In other words, cultural identity is understood as a complex of moral values and virtues possessed and practiced by a group of people or a community characterized by diversity. It is the cultural identity and belongingness that make people differ from one another. Besides, cultural identity or ethnicity "requires

¹ The *notion of culture* can be deployed into "four clusters of meanings: *first*, culture as a *cognitive category*, a state of mind [with an ideal goal implied], which is the proper concern of the arts and ethics; *second*, culture as the level of *collective social development*, with this sphere of concern designated as 'culture and society'; *third*, culture as *the arts*, where a restricted sphere of self-conscious expression is designated [and may be reserved for particular groups, with their own self-images]; and *fourth*, culture as *the way of life of people*, the sphere of complex practical activity, or praxis" that denotes "sets of ideas embedded within routine practice and familiar institutions, and read them as implicated in the reports of self which we make, or in self-identity." P.W. Preston, (1997), *Political/Cultural Identity: Citizens and Nations in a Global Era*, London - California - New Delhi: SAGE Publications, pp. 38-39.

² Jerry V. Diller, (2007), *Cultural Diversity: A Primer for the Human Services U.S.A.*: Thomas Brooks/Cole, 3rd edition, pp. 61-62, passim p. 65.

³ Karmela Liebkind, (1989), *New Identities in Europe: Immigrant Ancestry and Ethnic Identity of Youth*, England: Gower Publishing Company Ltd., p. 21.

the self-consciousness recognition by a group of individuals of commonalities that emerge through their conformity to similar ways of acting and being.⁴ All aspects of cultural identity will be expressed through the possession of similar cultural starts, like language, styles of dress, personal adornment, material objects and particular ways of behaving.⁵ For instance, a common way of building and decorating houses will consequently be indicative of a shared set of values, which, in turn, will indicate a cultural identity.

Since the very beginning, people were divided into groups sharing the same cultural values that gave them cultural identity and enabled them to survive. Among those people were the Albanians too, who, although small in number, have fought very hard to maintain their culture identity. The Council of Europe (2009)⁶ considers "Albania," as one of the oldest countries on the Balkan Peninsula, and its people, the Albanians, have been recognized as "indigenous peoples" who, based on their unique culture and language, "would place them among the oldest groups of peoples in Europe."⁷

Albania being situated at the cross roads of Europe, the Balkans, the Mediterranean and Illyria, has made it very attractive to others especially the neighboring countries, i.e., Greece, Italy, Serbia, and Macedonia. Its strategic location made Robin Alison Remington to assert that "Albania is a state slightly larger than Maryland with a strategic importance the size of China."⁸ Indeed, Albania occupies a strategic location, historically and politically. At the southern entrance to the Adriatic, Albania was the steppingstone from which the Romans moved to the east. At the crossroads, many different people have passed through or maintained dominion, but the Albanian people have largely been able to maintain their unique culture identity. However, the strategic location of Albanian has not contributed a lot to the exposure of

⁴ Mark Grahame, (1988), "Material culture and Roman identity," in *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, edited by Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry London and New York: Routledge Press, p. 159.

⁵ Ibid., p. 159, passim p. 162.

⁶ The Council of Europe/ERICarts, (2009), "Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe," 10th ed., accessed August 10, 2011.
<http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/pprintclip.php>

⁷ Dennis Hupchick and Harold Cox, (1996), *A Concise Historical Atlas of Eastern Europe*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 3.

⁸ This is expressed in the forward to Elez Biberaj's book: (1998), *Albania in Transition: The Rocky Road to Democracy*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, p. xi.

its inspiring culture values as well as its splendid beauty; rather it has created for Albania a reputation for being mysterious, unknown and unapproachable.⁹ Also, Albania has been comprehended by some people as "a little known, misunderstood land which sort of swirls through the mountain mists into a never-never-land of mystery and claims of blood feuds and the exotic, having, for strangers, all the reality of 'Brigadoon'."¹⁰ ¹¹

Over the past fifty years, Albania has been ruled by communist regime, which isolated it from the rest of the world in general and Europe in particular until the early 1990s when the authoritarian regime was replaced with Western democracy. However, the Western democracy introduced to Albania and Albanians has created a disorder in the Albanian culture. According to the Albanian history, the Albanian culture has been strong enough to preserve its origin and resist assimilation by other dominating cultures, like the Roman culture, Slavic culture, Ottoman culture, and Communist culture. Nevertheless, it could not resist the Western secular-capitalist culture, which within a period of twenty-one years has given it a different identity, which has made Albanians to feel strangers in their own country. Therefore, the revival of the Albanian culture is seen as a crucial starting point where Albania and its people will be able to get what they deserve the best.

Albania of the twenty-first century is one of only two Europe's predominantly Muslim country¹² (the other country is newly independent Kosovo)¹³ that is struggling very hard to restore back its culture identity. In order to understand the influence of Islam on

⁹ Tom Winnifrith, (1992) "Introduction," in *Perspectives on Albania*, edited by Tom Winnifrith, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD., p. 1.

¹⁰ It denotes a place that is idyllic, unaffected by time, or remote from reality. Origin of *BRIGADOON* from *Brigadoon*, village in the musical *Brigadoon* (1947) by A. J. Lerner and F. Loewe. They are the first known users of this term on 1968, accessed August 10, 2011. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/brigadoon>

¹¹ Suzan A. McClear, (2001), *Albanians and their Culture: A Study of their Defining Character and Uniqueness*, A Thesis Presented To the Faculty of California State University Dominguez Hills In Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in Humanities, published online, accessed August 6, 2011. http://www.mcclear.net/albanians_&_culture.htm

¹² Elez Biberaj, (1990), *Albania: A Socialist Maverick*, Boulder, San Francisco, & Oxford: Westview Press, p. 10

¹³ John L. Esposito, (2009), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, vol. 1, "Albania," p. 107.

Albanian culture, it is very crucial to start this study with a historical background of Albania and Albanians.

Historical Background of Albania and Albanians

Albania, according to some sources, is a name given to a country located in the Balkan Peninsula¹⁴ derived from an ancient Illyrian tribe, the *Albanoi* that in turn took its name from the Indo-European word *Alb* denoting 'mountain',¹⁵ who inhabited part of modern-day Albania from around 1225 B.C. to 200 C.E.¹⁶ In another source, the name "Albania" was given by the Romans in ancient times after a port called Albanopolis.¹⁷ Also, the name of Albania is to be found in 13th century Latin dictionaries as *Arbanenses*, which is similar to the Byzantine name *Albanon*.¹⁸ Latter on, the name "Albania" has been replaced by its people with the name "*shqipëri*,"¹⁹ which means the "Land of Eagles"²⁰ (from *shqipónjë* "eagle").

Albania²¹ is a mountainous country located in south-eastern Europe and situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the southwest part of the Balkan Peninsula. It borders with Montenegro,

¹⁴ See *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (1998), Vol. 1, 15th Edition, p. 206, "Albania".

¹⁵ JOHN EVERETT-HEATH, (2005) "Albania." *Concise Dictionary of World Place-Names*, Oxford University Press, accessed July 12, 2011, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O209-Albania.html>

¹⁶ "Albanians," (1999), *Junior Worldmark Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, The Gale Group, Inc., *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed July 12, 2011, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435900015.html>

¹⁷ Jane Jurgens, (2000), "Albanian Americans," *Gale Encyclopaedia of Multicultural America*, the Gale Group Inc., accessed July 12, 2011, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3405800014.html>

¹⁸ Ramadan Marmullaku, (1975), *Albania and the Albanians*, translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Margot and Bosko Milosavljevic, London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, Ltd., p. 5.

¹⁹ Elez Biberaj, (1990), *Albania: A Socialist Maverick*, p. 11.

²⁰ George W. Gawrych, (2006) *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874-1913*, London – New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., p. 21.

²¹ Albania is named as the Republic of Albania (Republika e Shqipërisë) since 1991; the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (1976); the People's Republic of Albania (1946); the Kingdom of Albania (1928); and the Republic of Albania (1925). Albania's independence was recognized in principle in 1912, where nearly half of the Albanian population was left outside the country's political boundaries, mainly in Serbia (Kosovo) and Macedonia. However, true independence was gained in 1921.

Serbia, and Macedonia to the north and east, Kosovo to the northeast, Greece to the south and southeast, and the Adriatic Sea to the west.²² It is one of the smallest countries in south-eastern Europe with a total area of 11,100 square miles (28,748 square km).²³ The capital city is Tirana. Albania has a population of 3,581,655 (July 2006 est.). It consists of Albanians 95%, Greeks 3%, and others 2% (Vlachs, Gypsies, Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonians and Bulgarians, 1989 est.). From the total population, 70% are Muslims, 20% Orthodox Christians, and 10% Roman Catholic Christians.²⁴ The official language is Albanian language (derived from Tosks dialect).²⁵

Albanians, according to some historical sources, are the people who have dwelled in Albania since the beginning of Illyrians' settlement on the Adriatic shores. The Ottoman Turks called them *Arnavut* and the Arabs *al-Arnā'ūt*.²⁶ Albanians claim to be the descendents of the ancient Illyrians, who lived in central Europe and migrated southward to the Gulf of *Árta* in northern Greece by the beginning of the Iron Age.²⁷ The Illyrians were the ancient Indo-European people, who have resided throughout the greater part of their history in the Western half of the Balkan Peninsula from at least 1000 B.C.²⁸

The Illyrian population also entered the annals of medieval history known by a new name coined from the Illyrian *Albanoi* tribe, who, according to second-century A.D. geographer, Ptolemy of Alexandria, dwelt in the mountains between Durrës, Dibra and Albanopolis.²⁹ The archeological materials that are found in Albanian territories indicate that the Illyrians arrived in the Balkans as early as 2200 B.C. and throughout the Bronze Age. They formed their own ethnos and culture during the

²² Robert Elsie, (2004), *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., new edition, p. 1, and Jane Jurgens, *Gale Encyclopaedia of Multicultural America*.

²³ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

²⁴ *Encyclopaedia of the World Muslims: Tribes, Castes and Communities*, (2001), edited by N.K. Singh & A.M. Khan, Delhi (India): Global Vision Publishing House, vol. 1, "Albanians," p. 37.

²⁵ Jane Jurgens, *Gale Encyclopaedia of Multicultural America*.

²⁶ H.T. Norris (1993), *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World*, London: Hurst & Co. Publisher, Ltd., p. 33.

²⁷ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 206-207. See also Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 5.

²⁹ Norris, *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World*, p. 34.

Bronze Age, which helped them to advance in their social and economic development. In the later Bronze Age, the smaller Illyrian clans progressed economically, and therefore, they merged with one another to form broad Illyrian communities with common cultural and linguistic characteristics. The Illyrian economy and culture were consolidated and assumed more stable characteristics with the emergence of fortified towns, during the Iron Age, too.³⁰

The Albanians have been divided into two distinct tribal and dialectal groupings, Ghegs and Tosks, with the line of demarcation between them, being the Shkumbin River, which flows through Elbasan. The Ghegs and the Tosks differ from each other in linguistic, historical-cultural and socio-religious characteristics.³¹ The Ghegs who were herders maintained their self-governing society which comprised of clans and an association of clans called *bajrak* (literally, banner).³² The tribesmen of northern Albania recognized no law but the *Code of Leke Dukagjini*³³ – *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*,³⁴ which is, according to some traditions, linked with the Prince Leke himself.³⁵ The code regulates a variety of subjects, including blood vengeance. Also, the Canon (in Albanian – *Kanun*) embodied both civil and penal regulations. Even today, many Albanian highlanders regard the *Canon – Kanun*³⁶ as a supreme law of the land. In the southern part, mostly peasants *Tosks* lived in compact villages under their elected rulers.

The Genesis of Albanian Culture

³⁰ Edwin E. Jacques, (1995), *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, North Carolina & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, p. 28.

³¹ Nathalie Clayer, (1997), "Islam, State and Society in Post-Communist Albania," in *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, edited by Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki, London: Hurst & Company, in association with the Islamic Council, p. 117.

³² Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 176.

³³ Gjecovi Shtjefen, (1989), *The Code of Leke Dukagjini*, translated by Leonard Fox, New York.

³⁴ A.Sh.K. Gjecov, (1933) *Kanuni i Leke Dukagjinit*, Shkoder, cited in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (1979), Leiden: E.J. Brill, vol. 1, p. 652, "Arnawutluk."

³⁵ Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 176.

³⁶ Kanun: is the Albanian name for the Code of Leke Dukagjini, or as they use it Kanuni i Lek Dukagjinit.

The genesis of the Albanian culture goes back to the Illyrian people before they settled on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. Illyrians are considered as the prehistoric inhabitants of the Balkans, whose culture is very difficult to explore, because of the absence of written documents. However, the archeological science has enabled modern people to trace their origin as well as their culture belongingness or identity. Will the help of this science, the culture of prehistoric inhabitants of Albania appears from the discoveries of dwellings, tombs, ceramics, tools, weapons, and other articles.³⁷

According to the archeologists, all these discoveries enable an understanding of the domestic, economic, social and religious activities of the ancient Illyrians. The earliest records about Albanian archeology go back to the visit of Ciriaco d'Ancona by Italian galley during 1434-1435, to describe the monuments he observed in some Albanian archeological sites of Lezha, Durrës, Apollonia, Butrint, etc. During this time there was shown any interest about the genesis or roots of Albania culture and heritage. Rather, these discoveries enriched foreign museums, especially those of Italy.³⁸

They were living in a society based on tribal system of life. Therefore, many wars happened between the Illyrian tribes, which led them to the assimilation of each other culture. During the IV - II centuries BC, the Illyrians created their own states with mighty fortress in order to resist the Romans who wanted to extend their control over the Adriatic Sea. There were several Illyrian-Roman wars, which started in 229BC and ended in 167BC with the victory of Rome. Because of Roman occupation, the Illyrian people were on sale to slavery and their territory broken up into small administrative units. After the division of the Roman Empire in 395 AD, the Albanian territories were assigned to the Empire of the East, which however exercised nominal authority limited to the coastal areas, while the interior was invaded by the Goths, Huns, Bulgars, and Slavs (IV and V centuries AD).³⁹

Although the Illyrians came under the rule of the Greeks and the Romans, yet they preserved their most important cultural elements, like language, traditions, and religious beliefs.

³⁷ Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, pp. 2-4.

³⁸ See Ibid.

³⁹ Elez Biberaj, (1990), *Albania: A Socialist Maverick*, p. 11.

Language

According to the archeological facts, it can certainly be taken that the Indo-European speakers, ancestral to the later Illyrians, were present in Albania by 2000BC at the latest.⁴⁰ Although, the Albanian Language has been influenced by the languages of those who have occupied Albania, like Greeks, Latins, Slavs, Turks and others, yet the Albanian language itself traces back to an earlier base.⁴¹ Therefore, it has been claimed that Albanian language allegedly descended from Illyrian, who descended from Pelasgian. Albanian language is an Indo-European language of "satem" type like Armenian, Indo-Iranian and Slavonic. There has not been any literary records before 1496 A.D., but ancient Illyrian and ancient Epirote, on the basis of personal and place names, are held to be the prototypes of **Geg** (northern) and *Tosk* (southern) Albanian respectively. For instance, Illyrian *mantua*, *mantia*, "bramble," and *grōssa* "file," are Albanian *mand*, *manzë* and *grresë* respectively. Also, Macedonian, Thracian and Dacian were languages of Albanian type.⁴²

There have been many scholarly researches undertaken by well-known scholars, who through their findings have connected the Albanian language with the ancient Illyrians. Godfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646-1717) in one of his letter of 10 December 1709, had mentioned that the Albania language is the language of the ancient Illyrians.⁴³ Johan Georg von Hahn (1811-1869) published in 1854 a three-volume book about *Albanian Studies* on Albanian history, language and culture. The ancient sources available on his time convinced him that the Illyrians were not Greeks; rather, they were descending from the ancient Pelasgians. He proved in his research that many Albanian place names carried over directly from their ancient Illyrian names. Based on this, he claimed that the Albanian language is descended directly from Illyrian that descended

⁴⁰ See Anthony Harding, (1992), "The Prehistoric Background of Illyrian Albania," in *Perspectives on Albania*, edited by Tom Winniffrith, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD., pp. 14-19.

⁴¹ Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 29.

⁴² Halil İnalçik, (2003), "Arnawutluk – the Ottoman name for Albania" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Web CD Edition, Brill Academic Publishers.

⁴³ Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 30.

from Pelasgian.⁴⁴ Another scholar Franz Bopp (1791-1867) maintained that Albanian language belongs to the Indo-European Family of languages.⁴⁵ The same opinion was given latter on by different scholars, like Gustav Mayor (1850-1900), Holger Pedersen (1867-1953), Christian Sandfeld-Jensen (1873-1942), Maximillian Lambertz (1882-1963), Eqrem Çabej (1908-1980), and so on.⁴⁶

Traditions

The traditions and customs of the Illyrians easily can be found among the Albanians even before the Ottoman Muslims ruled them. The Illyrians were regulating their social and political life according to their tribal council whose members were among the elderly people. The same thing has been practiced by the Albanians, who were managing their social and political life according to the old tribal system. They lived for centuries within small communities of blood relations. Although the Illyrian people progressed economically, yet they were divided into many tribes, like Liburni, Dalmatae, Ardaei, Dardani, *Albani*, Taulanti, Labeati, Orestes, Molossi, Chaones and Thesproti.⁴⁷ This division shows that the Illyrian people were not united, and therefore, not resistant to the invaders, who many times occupied their lands, i.e., the Greeks and Macedonians, before the Romans ruled around the time of Christ. This is very important to note here that the same division took place among the Albanians, who were divided into the following tribes: the Dukagjin, Balshajt, Shpata, Muzaki, Komneni, Ariani, Thopia and Kastrioti.⁴⁸ The tribal system preserved by the Albanian community enabled them to preserve their traditions and customs as well as their value system nearly intact for several centuries until the present day. The kinship system was the basic principle for their social organization. On the other hand, *besa* (an oath)⁴⁹ was a symbol of loyalty for the Illyrians as well as for Albanians until today.

Religion

⁴⁴ See Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁵ See Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Ibid., pp. 32-35.

⁴⁷ Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁹ Alexander Lopasic, "Cultural Values of the Albanians in the Diaspora," in *Perspectives on Albania*, edited by Tom Winniffrith, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD., pp. 104-105.

As far as their religion is concerned, the Illyrians were Pagans, worshipping the Sun and other Planets. They had many superstitious beliefs. In fact, every empire that stepped on the lands of Illyricum, brought with them their religious and cultural values, which somehow influenced the Illyrians, and latter on what is named as Albania.

According to the history of religion of Albanians, their ancestors, the Pelasgians, did not have any material representation for their gods. Their religion was of an idol-free nature worship. In this sense, the Pelasgians having no revelation, avoided idolatry worship.⁵⁰ They believed in the life beyond the grave, therefore, they buried personal ornaments with their dead.⁵¹ The supreme being of the ancient Illyrians is called by the name of the old Indo-European thunder god, *Perendi*. The name of an old Illyrian god, *Hen* or *En*, which is preserved even today in the Albanian word "Monday" *E Hën*.⁵²

The religious life of Illyrians changed completely when the Greeks and the Romans occupied their land. *Firstly*, the Greeks introduced to them the religious system of idolization of gods. They added to Illyrian's idol-free nature of religion the art of painting and sculpture. Therefore, later Illyrians were influenced by them and started to personalize their gods in many shapes and forms. In the religion of the ancient Albanians, the Pelasgians, there was not any revealed book or a charismatic founder. It did not have any developed theology, or creed to define their religion. Rather, their religion was practiced at every house by each father, who served as priest of his own household.⁵³

Secondly, the Romans made a little religious contribution to occupied Albania, because, their religious system was not different from the Greeks. The difference could be seen in the names dedicated to their gods. For instance, the supreme Roman god of the sky was Jupiter, which corresponds to the Greek god Zeus. Both, the Greeks and Romans made their gods in their own image. However, Christianity was introduced to the Illyrians, Albanians, during the Roman occupation. According to some historical sources, Christianity in Albania claims

⁵⁰ Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 103.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵² *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (1986), edited by Mircea Eliade, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, vol. 1, 178 "Albanian Religion".

⁵³ Ibid., p. 103-104.

apostolic foundation.⁵⁴ Christianity, hence, was introduced to the Illyrians during the first century of the Christian era, which is before Constantine declared Christianity as the official religion for the Roman Empire. This can be found in the statement of Paul in Romans 15, verse 19: "*Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power and the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.*"⁵⁵

The above passage shows that the strong culture identity developed by the Albanians since the beginning of their existence as a separate community dwelling on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, has helped them to preserve the genesis of their culture values from the assimilation of dominating cultures, which have been present in the Albania territory as a result of invasion or occupation.

The Process of Integration Between Muslim Culture And Albanian Culture

The Illyrians or the Albanians came under the Muslim rule in the 14th and 15th centuries, when the Ottoman Muslims entered the western Balkans. During the five centuries of their rule, about two-third of the Albanian population, including its most powerful feudal landowners, embraced Islam, which was not introduced to them by force. Before discussing the process of integration between Muslim culture and Albanian culture, it will be very important to identify two major factors that led Albanians to accept Islam as their way of life.

The *first* most important factor that led Albanians to embrace Islam and accept the Muslim culture introduced to them by the Ottoman Muslims, is *the separation of Christian Churches during the Byzantine rule*.⁵⁶ In 1054, the Christian churches were divided into two: the Eastern Orthodox Churches influenced by the Hellenian culture and the Roman Catholic Churches influenced by the Latino-Roman culture. Thus,

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 137-138.

⁵⁵ 1769 Oxford King James Bible "Authorized Version," accessed August 10, 2011. <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Romans-15-19/>

⁵⁶ Byzantine rule refers to the East Roman Empire that was based in its capital city at Constantinople, [Stephen Hill, (1992), "Byzantium and the Emergence of Albania," in *Perspectives on Albania*, edited by Tom Winniffrith, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD., pp. 40-57], which in 1453 was governed by Ottoman Muslim Turks.

Churches in the northern part of Albania remained under the administration of the Latin Church based in Vatican. The Churches of central and southern parts of Albania remained under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox Church centered in Constantinople.⁵⁷ After the division of the Churches, the Albanian land became a place of battle arena for the political and religious supremacy of each church. This created disorder in the Albanian community and threatened the future of Albanian cultural and territorial identities. This had a great impact also on the religious aspect of the Albanians, who lost their trust towards the churches.⁵⁸ In this sense, the theological conflict between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, worsen the religious aspect of Albanians' everyday life, who thought that Christianity could contribute to their unification. Also, Albanians did not see any kind of support from both Churches in this aspect, and therefore, they accepted the Ottoman Muslims as their only hope for their survival.

The second factor is the *threat caused to Albanian culture and land by the neighbors, such as Bulgarians, Serbs, Normans, and Venetians* who ruled the Balkans especially Albania from tenth to fourteenth centuries.⁵⁹ Their occupation created many problems for the Albanian culture. All of them had a very dangerous aim towards Albania and its culture. They tried very hard to assimilate Albanian culture by introducing their cultural values. For instance, the Serbian central government and Serbian church made the old Slavic language as the administrative language. All documents and sacred books were translated from the Greek language to Slavic language. They ordered the destruction of all documents written in Latin Alphabet, like Albanian or Latin.⁶⁰ The cultural reforms introduced by the Serbs and other neighboring countries to the Albanians, led to the destruction of Albanian culture and heritage.

⁵⁷ Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, p. 159.

⁵⁸ Muhamet Pirraku (199_) "Shkaqet e Kalimit ne Islam te Shqiptaret" in *Rreth Perhapjes se Islamit nder Shqiptaret*, edited by Muhidin Ahmeti, Prizeren: PENDA, 2nd edition, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁹ Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 8, and Michael E. Martin, (1992), "Conquest and Commerce: Normans and Venetians in Albania," in *Perspectives on Albania*, edited by Tom Winnifrith, London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD., pp. 58-73.

⁶⁰ See Muhamet Pirraku (199_) "Shkaqet e Kalimit ne Islam te Shqiptaret" in *Rreth Perhapjes se Islamit nder Shqiptaret*, p. 31.

Furthermore, Albanians were attempting to create for themselves a culture identity as well as a territorial landmark, which will enable them to establish a unique identity. It was very important for Albanians to have a unique religion as well as a unique country. These two important desires of the Albanians became a reality when Albanian came under the Ottoman administration. The integration process between the Muslim culture and the Albanian culture has been very necessary and the only way to preserve the Albanian ethnicity as well as its borders.⁶¹ The Ottoman Muslims have spread Islam to the Balkans and especially to the Albanians without force. The process of Islamization has been done based on the voluntary bases of individuals who freely would like to embrace Islam.

According to Islam, there is no compulsion in embracing Islam as a way of life.⁶² Every Muslim regardless of race, colour, language, or nationality shares the same *Dīn* (Transcendental Way of Life) *al-Islām* (total submission and obedience to Allah S.W.T.) on which his cultural identity is based. For a Muslim, Islam is not a part of his culture; rather it is a way of life on which his spiritual and physical aspects of life are based. Indeed, one's willingly submission to the fold of this *Dīn*, denotes that all aspects of his spiritual and material, individual and communal, social and cultural, economic and political, religious and secular life will be governed by it.

In this sense, *al-Islām* stands for a Muslim as a comprehensive way of life and not as a part or aspect of his culture, on which his worldly and hereafter affairs will be entirely managed. When *al-Islām* introduces itself to a community, it will not change or eliminate the cultural values that do not violate Islamic rulings, it will change only those cultural values that bring harm and enmity to the members of society.

Al-Islām teaches Muslims to practice Islamic cultural values not only within the boundaries of *al-Masjīd*⁶³ or their houses. Rather, they should practice them in their individual, familial, and communal aspects of life as well as in their relationships with other fellow Muslims and non-Muslims.

⁶¹ Iliaz Rexha (199_), "Antagonizmi ndermjet dy Kishave per Dominim ne Tokat e Arberise (I Hapi Rruge Fese Islame), in *Rreth Perhapjes se Islamit nder Shqiptaret*, p. 31.

⁶² "Let there be no compulsion in religion..." (Qur'an, al-Baqarah: 256)

⁶³ The place of *al-ØalÈh* (prayer) where a Muslim prostrates himself to worship Allah (S.W.T.). For more information refer to *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, "MasjÊd"

In this sense, Muslims should develop for themselves an exemplary personality with the highest Islamic moral and cultural values, as Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) did, in order to be respected and accepted by others. Otherwise, the Islamic values and teachings could be vilified and opposed by others, i.e., the Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, secularists, and others.

The Muslim history has shown that after the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), there have been many righteous Muslim leaders who have treated their subjects according to the Divine Decree of Allah (s.w.t.), and therefore, their subjects, i.e., Muslims and non-Muslims, have lived peacefully by respecting each other's ways of life. As a result, progress and prosperity have been achieved. This can be seen clearly in the time of the four Righteous Successors of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), *al-Andalusia*, the Ottoman Caliphate, etc.

Indeed, the Ottoman Sultan⁶⁴, Mehmet II, introduced the same kind of *al-Islām* to the Albanians. It is very important to mention here that the greatest kindness for the Ottoman Muslims they could show a man was to bring him into the salvation of *al-Islam*.⁶⁵ Therefore, such good attitude made them expand the territories of the Ottoman Caliphate outside the walls of Istanbul up to the Balkans, and especially Albania, which came immediately under the protection of the Ottoman Caliphate. The good attitude of Ottoman Muslims increased by 1690 the number of Albanian Muslims to 70%, approximately the same ratio as today. Those who embraced Islam first were the noble families, who latter were followed by their subjects.⁶⁶

The Ottoman Sultan introduced the *Millet* (grouping people according to their national identity) system in order to have a smooth administration of countries, which were under the Ottoman governance. This system was the most important mechanism to maintain ethnic and cultural autonomy and pluralism among the subjects of the Ottoman Caliphate, who were coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds. According to this system, every *Millet* (religious community)

⁶⁴ Sultan (representing the Ottoman Caliphate) had the highest authority and responsibility towards Muslim and non-Muslim subjects living together within the Ottoman Caliphate boundaries, i.e., inside and outside Istanbul, and who were under his protection.

⁶⁵ T.W. Arnold, (2002), *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2nd edition, p. 158.

⁶⁶ Florian Bieber, (2000), "Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of the Nation State," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 16-17.

"had the right to deal with religious matters concerning the Church and priesthood, with matters relating to the individual and the family such as marriage, divorce, engagement and inheritance."⁶⁷

Every group of people of the *Millet* system, spoke the same language, had the same religion, customs, folklore, etc. Different ethnic and cultural groups existed side by side. They had sufficient knowledge about the other's way of life.⁶⁸ In other words, the existence of cultural autonomy and pluralism in the Ottoman caliphate have contributed a lot to the process of integration between Muslim culture and other's cultural values. This phenomenon can be seen obviously in the Albanian context.

The governing of Albania by the Ottoman Muslims from 1478 until 1912⁶⁹ brought indeed a great change and progress in the cultural system of the Albanian community. Albania and Albanians were to be subjected to over four hundred years of Ottoman Islamization process, which led to the change of Albania as a country as well as its culture. Since then, the old Albania culture was replaced with a new culture, the Muslim culture, which contributed significantly in the making of today's Albanians and their culture.⁷⁰ Some have argued that the expansion of the Ottoman Caliphate territory to the southern had a positive consequence particularly for the Albanians of saving them from the ethnic assimilation by their neighbors, especially the Greeks and Slavs. It is very important to mention here that Albania became truly Albanian in an ethnic sense during the Ottoman Caliphate period, only.⁷¹

The process of integration or Islamization of the Albanians and their culture was not only a gradual process, but also one dependent on the location and, more importantly, on the original religion of the population. An Islamization campaign was organized by the Ottoman

⁶⁷ Kemal Karpat, (1972), *An Inquiry into the Social Foundations of Nationalism in the Ottoman State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 36, cited by Plamen Makariev (1998), "Power Relations and Multicultural in the Balkans," in *National, Cultural and Ethnic Identities: Harmony beyond Conflict*, edited by Jaroslav Hroch, David Hollan and George F. McLean, USA: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, p. 197.

⁶⁸ Plamen Makariev (1998), "Power Relations and Multicultural in the Balkans," in *National, Cultural and Ethnic Identities: Harmony beyond Conflict*, edited by Jaroslav Hroch, David Hollan and George F. McLean, USA: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, pp. 197-198.

⁶⁹ See John Everett-Heath, "Albania," *Concise Dictionary of World Place-Names*.

⁷⁰ Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, p. 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Muslims in the seventeenth century to insure the loyalty of the Albanians. This process was not achieved forcibly; rather, it was the concrete economic incentives that caused the conversions, such as the promise of land and lower taxes.⁷²

Islam had a great impact on the development and sustainability of Albanian culture. In the first centuries under Ottoman rule, Albanian cultural and literary production expressed itself exclusively in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Few religious texts, poems, and historical treatises were published in Albanian from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. The Albanian language, written in the Arabic alphabet, became increasingly influenced by Turkish.⁷³ The Albanian literature written in Arabic letters, which has been known as the literature of *bejtexhinjve*. The Albanian *alhamiada* written in a good Albanian syntax was spread in all parts of Albania. This type of literature was a part of the spiritual life of Albanians at large.⁷⁴ We have to emphasize here that the close relationship between the universal motives of the eastern culture as well as the philosophical writings in both oriental and Albanian languages, had a great influence on an Albanian's life. For instance, the integration between these two cultures can be seen in the spiritual and material aspects of the Albanians as well as in Albanian architecture, dressing, cooking, house decoration, character, popular literature, etc.

Al-Dīn al-Islāmī introduced to the Albanian culture the concept of *Tawḥīd*, Allah (S.W.T.), which existed in the Illyrian religion before Greeks and Romans occupied them, who introduced to them the idol-worship of God. The oneness of God has been more logical to the ancient Albanians than the anthropomorphic form of Greek or Roman gods. Thus, Islam became the comprehensive way of life for every Albanian Muslim. Muslim culture added to the Albanian culture of those Albanians who embraced Islam, the beauty of Islam through the building of *Masajids*, *Medreses*, etc. Therefore, many *Masjids* were built in Albania since the beginning. Albanian's oldest *Masjid* was built in 1380 in the town of Berat,⁷⁵ which latter on became the most important centre for the integration of Muslim and Albanian cultures. There were

⁷² Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 16.

⁷³ See Florian Bieber, (2000), "Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of the Nation State," p. 16.

⁷⁴ Muhamet Pirraku (199_) "Shkaqet e Kalimit ne Islam te Shqiptaret" in *Rreth Perhapjes se Islamit nder Shqiptaret*, p. 85.

⁷⁵ John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, p. 107.

established many *Madrasah* (Islamic religious schools). Also, at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Berat flourished an intellectual elite and circles of poets who imitated Arab and Persian poets.⁷⁶ In other words, Berat, has been the most important city in Albania, which served as the centre for the Islamization process between the Muslim culture and Albanian culture. In Albania were established 1,127 Masjids, 1,306 Imams and Muftis and seventeen primary schools.⁷⁷

The integration of Muslim culture with the Albanian culture was done by the Albanian Muslims who after embracing Islam, dedicated themselves to the service of the Ottoman Caliphate. In order to appreciate the support of the Muslim Turks towards Albanian cultural and ethnic identities, the Albanian people in general and Muslims in particular served the Ottoman Caliphate sincerely. During the flourishing period of the Ottoman Caliphate, second part of fifteenth century until the first part of seventeenth century, many Albanians dedicated themselves willingly to the service of the Caliphate. Therefore, **25** out of 92 grand viziers were of Albanian origin, which is more than those of Turkish origin. Albanians proved themselves to be great army commanders, warriors, scholars, philosophers, poets, diplomats, historians, architects, medical doctors, and masters in different professions.⁷⁸

Some of the most outstanding military commanders likewise had Albanian roots.⁷⁹ For instance, at the end of the seventeenth century, four Albanian Muslims from the Koprulu family, Mehmet, Ahmed, Mustafa, and Hussein, served as grand wazirs in the Ottoman Caliphate.⁸⁰ These successes transformed the Albanians in the Ottoman Empire into loyal subjects whose future and identity were closely intertwined with the Ottoman Caliphate. Although Albanians got their independence from the Ottoman Caliphate on 1912, yet the Islamic values on which their culture was established continued to dominate the daily life of every Albanian Muslim even during the communist regime.

⁷⁶ See Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians*, p. 17.

⁷⁷ Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, p. 197.

⁷⁸ Muhamet Pirraku (199_) "Shkaqet e Kalimit ne Islam te Shqiptaret" in *Rreth Perhapjes se Islamit nder Shqiptaret*, p. 84.

⁷⁹ See Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, p. 197.

⁸⁰ *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, (2004), edited by Richard C. Martin, USA: Thomson Press, vol. 1, p. 102 "Islam in the Balkasn".

From the above discussion, it is obvious that the integration of Muslim culture and Albanian culture had taken place during a period of four hundred years, when the Albanians became the legal subjects of the Ottoman Caliphate. The Albanians saw the Muslim Turks as the only protectors against the often hostile Greeks and Serbs.

Conclusion

The findings achieved from this paper show that the integration of Muslim culture and Albanian culture played a very important role in the establishment of Albanian cultural and territorial identity. The influence of Islam on the Albanian culture, started when Albanians embraced Islam as their way of life and dedicated themselves completely to the service of the Ottoman Caliphate. The universal values of Islam added to the Albanian culture the democratic and universal norms, which were taken away from the Romans, Greeks, Serbs, etc. Islam did not destroy the genesis of Albanian culture; rather, it made it very dynamic, revived and enriched it with universal values. This is what made Albanian culture to have its right place among the European cultures. The Islam with its comprehensive values and norms helped Albanian culture to restore its identity. The Albanian culture after its integration with the Muslim culture became very colorful in nature and stronger than it was before. The existence of Islamic values among the twenty-first century Muslim Albanians, show the great influence of Islam on the Albanian culture. The universal motives of the Muslim culture had a great influence on an Albanian's spiritual and material aspects of life. Such influence appeared in the Albanians' language, religion, architecture, dressing, cooking, house decoration, character, popular literature, etc.