The Prophet, His *Mevlud*, and the Building of the Albanian Nation-State

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This chapter aims to explain how the *mevlud* (*mawlid* in Arabic, *mevlit* in Turkish) was linked to processes of nation-state building in Albania. For Albanians the term *mevlud* has various meanings, relating to the birth or birthday of the Prophet, celebratory events connected with his birth, and the artistic forms or genres that evolve along with and accompany these celebrations, such as panegyric poems. The present chapter concerns the latter two meanings, and treats them separately. Its first section analyses how translations into Albanian of the most widespread Turkish *mevlit* text, Süleyman Çelebi's *Vesiletü'n-Necât*, underpinned the process of nation-building after the end of the Ottoman period, and contributed to forming an Islamic national literature and diffusing the Albanian language. Our second section analyses the affirmation of the *mevlud* festival as a symbol of Sunnī Islam during the inter-war period and its subsequent suppression by the Communist regime, which substantially erased the community's memory of the *mevlud* celebrations. Our aim is to understand the incorporation of the Sunnī authorities into national ideologies, and how they in turn use the *mevlud* ritual as a means of legitimising their identity and leadership. The final section of the chapter examines the post-socialist revival of *mevlud* practices, secularised (and nationalised) by Sunnī national authorities and reshaped by foreign actors in a plural religious setting where believers, who are expressing their individual (and by now highly diversified) religiosity, know such traditions only superficially. Our aim is to understand how first socialist secularisation and then Salafist/globalised literalism decultured and alienated this ritual.

9.1 *Mevlud* Translation as a National Issue¹

In the Balkans the public celebration of the *kandili mevlit*,² often following Ottoman ceremonial traditions and practices, was commonly used by ordinary communities to express their religiosity. During private ceremonies, the faithful would sing and read in Turkish, using the text by Süleyman Çelebi, the *Vesîletü'n-Necât* (Path to salvation), or, more rarely, Barzanjî's *mawlid*.³ However, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the weakening of the empire, the *tanzimat* reforms, and the rise of movements for national independence increased the impetus to translate the *mevlit* into other languages.⁴ These translations into native languages contributed to the formation of a recitative style that was less Ottoman and more typically "Balkan". In Bosnia, it became important to form and preserve Bosnian Islam when the Grand Mufti of Sarajevo replaced the Ottoman religious authorities as supreme religious leader of the region. In Albania, the translation of the *mevlud* (as it is called in Albanian) was connected to the complex relationships between nationalism, language, and religious legacies. Albanians were a special case among the ethnic groups of the Ottoman mosaic because of the nature of their written literature and national emancipation. They were divided across different cultural zones in the empire (Muslim, Rum, and Latin *millet*),⁵ and did not possess a unified language or common alphabet. The Albanian language was composed of many dialects, divided into two major groups: *Gegë* (mostly Catholics and Sunnî Muslims) in the north, and *Toskë* (mostly Bektashi Muslims and Orthodox Christians) in the south. The social and linguistic divisions between

1 This section is mostly based on the works of Albanian historians who studied the *mevlud* in the Albanian language.

2 For more on this subject, see Zarccone, *Mevlid Kandili*, 307–20; Schimmel, *Das islamische Jahr*, 64–79; Georgeon, "Le Ramadan"; Nuri, "Bolu ve Muhitinde Kandil"; Chih, "Anthropologie d'une fête musulmane".

3 Ja'far b. Ḥasan al-Barzanjî (1716–64) wrote a *mawlid* text in the seventeenth century in Medina, entitled *'Iqd al-jawhar fî mawlid al-nabî al-azhar* (The jewelled necklace of the resplendent Prophet's birth), which is one of the most sung and widespread *mawlids* in the Arab world. See Chih, "Anthropologie d'une fête musulmane", 183.

4 For a survey about these translations, see Okiç, "Çeşitli Dillerde Mevlidler".

5 Albanians were divided across three denominational groups (Muslims 70 per cent, Orthodox Christians 20 per cent, Catholic Christians 10 per cent); these belonged respectively to the Muslim, Rum, and Latin *millet* (religious communities).

the *Gegë* and the *Toskë*,⁶ the cultural disparities between religious groups,⁷ the absence of an ancient culture, and the massive rate of illiteracy slowed the development of nationalist consciousness (Albanism) until the necessary (re)invention of literary culture and standardisation of the language had occurred: these processes were intrinsically linked throughout many different phases and approaches.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century a number of religious and pious works, many of which were written by Catholics, were translated into Albanian, creating a sort of bridge between the national question and religious practice. This phase of “gestation” preceded the subsequent diffusion of profane texts that contributed to forging the national identity.⁸ Many of these texts were written by, or under the impulse of, the Albanian diaspora (*arbëreshë* minorities) in Italy, Greece, Serbia, Egypt, and Turkey, who were influenced by nationalist ideologies and values.⁹ These literary movements attempting to construct a national consciousness were varied; each group had its own aims, sometimes communicated by foreign actors such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁰ The question of whether to use the Latin, Greek, or Arabic alphabet led to the formation of a network of “Albanist” intellectuals with very diverse political and cultural objectives.¹¹ In 1878, many of them participated in the establishment of the “League of Prizren” (League for the Defence of the Rights of the Albanian Nation) to promote the “Albanian issue”, the increasing importance of which later brought about the publication of many journals and books in Albanian. The Ottoman authorities attempted to prevent the spread of Albanian ABCs and books, and outlawed the teaching of the language.¹² The levels of participation in the nationalist project among Muslims reflected their ambivalence: among the *Toskë*, the Bektashis, who had been persecuted by the empire since

6 For example, among the *Gegë*, religious divisions were sharper, and illiteracy was quite widespread; among the *Toskë*, the social structures were more nuanced, religious barriers were less rigid, and illiteracy was lower. See Clayer, “Le goût du fruit défendu”, online ed., paras 17–33; Gjinari et al., *Atlasi dialektologjik i gjuhës shqipe*.

7 Each *millet* had a specific educational system, each of which advocated a particular literary culture (Muslim-Arabic; Persian and Turkish; Orthodox-Greek; Catholic-Italian or -Latin), and shaped cultural disparities among Albanian populations.

8 Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*, chapter 6: “1876–1896: Du réseau d’albanistes aux réseaux de lecteurs”.

9 Clayer, “Le goût du fruit défendu”, online ed., paras 17–33.

10 The Austro-Hungarian Empire claimed to support the establishment of a principedom in Albania that would have been managed by the Austro-Hungarian authorities; see Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*.

11 Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*, 580–625.

12 Clayer, “Le goût du fruit défendu”, online ed., paras 17–33.

1826, actively participated in the nationalist movement because they aspired to become an independent religious community in a new Albanian nation-state: some Bektashis taught the Albanian language in their lodges (*tekke*), distributed Albanian ABCs and books, and supported bands of militias (*çeta*). Among Sunnī Muslims, mostly *Gegë*, nationalist activities were less prevalent, as they wanted to preserve their Turkish-Islamic culture.¹³

Nevertheless, some Muslim “Albanists” carried out the translation and production of religious poems in the service of an Islamic culture that, they hoped, would be more Albanian than Turkish. In this way, they ended up using Islam as a political means for the formation of a Muslim nationalist discourse. The Ottoman authorities, paradoxically, themselves favoured a similar process when they used Islamic ideology to underpin their imperial legitimacy. Some Islamic scholars who studied in Istanbul or other imperial cities wrote poems about the Prophet’s birth that were inspired by the *Vesiletü’n-Necât*, which was the most widespread *mevlud* and was translated in full several times.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Hasan Zyko Kamberi composed the first Albanian language *mevlud*,¹⁴ using Arabic characters.¹⁵ He was a poet belonging to the literary movement called Bejtexhinj (from Turkish: *beyte* meaning “poem”).¹⁶ According to Robert Elsie, this genre, mostly comprising verses, was strongly influenced by Turkish, Arabic, and Persian literature,¹⁷ from which it borrowed several terms that were then absorbed into standard Albanian.¹⁸ The themes of Kamberi’s writings were mainly religious, in genres ranging from intimate mystical reflection to educational works dedicated to the spread of the Islamic faith – all expressed in the native language and all written using the Arabic alphabet. Kamberi, born in Starje i Kolonjës, a southern village near Mount Grammos, was among the main representatives of Bejtexhinj; among his many works, some were markedly satirical. For his *mevlud* he drew inspiration from Çelebi’s *Vesiletü’n-Necât*, which is made up of 51 octosyllables

13 Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*, 580–625.

14 He participated in several military campaigns, some with Ali Pasha Tepelena (1744–1822). He was a dervish in the Bektashi sect and died in his native village at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, we do not have any further information about him.

15 Unfortunately, we do not have further information about the year of publication. See Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 31–34.

16 Elsie, *Albanian Literature*, 291–303.

17 Elsie, “Albanian Literature in the Moslem tradition”, 291–303.

18 According to Elsie, the Islamic mosaic of south-eastern Europe modulated the speculative character of the Bejtexhinj verses: the authority of the Sunnī policies of the sultan, Sufi mysticism (sometimes heterodox), and later, the liberal irredentism of the Bektashis. Cf. Elsie, “The Hybrid Soil of the Balkans”.

in rhymed quatrains, featuring 227 verses altogether, of which 98 are dedicated to the birth of the Prophet and 107 to his ascension into heaven.¹⁹

The second Albanian *mevlud*, also inspired by Çelebi's text, and also using Arabic characters, was written by Ismail Floqi.²⁰ This *mevlud* is divided into three parts: the first describes the birth of the Prophet, the second treats the episodes of *isrā'* and *mī'rāj* (Muḥammad's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension to heaven), and the last deals with his death and some posthumous episodes. Floqi's work achieved less notoriety than had Kamberi's *mevlud*, which was also mentioned by Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), the national poet of Albania. However, in 1939 the Islamic Community of Albania published a new version of Floqi's text, using Latin characters.

Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku (1855–1913) composed the first Albanian translation of the *Vesiletü'n-Necât*. He was born in Ulqin, Montenegro, and grew up in Shkodër where he studied at the local madrasa.²¹ After graduating he began teaching in an elementary school, and in 1889 he became the imam of Lezhë. Ulqinaku studied several languages and translated many books into Albanian. He also wrote (in Albanian) a book on Turkism, as well as a Turkish-Albanian dictionary. In 1878, he asked to be allowed to translate the *Vesiletü'n-Necât* into the Albanian language (using Arabic characters), and received the assent of the sultan, who then rejected his version because it was in the Shkodër dialect. He used Rızâ Efendi's (d. 1890) version of the *Vesiletü'n-Necât*,²² which was easily available at the time, for his translation, adapting it to the metrics of the Albanian language. The first edition was published anonymously in Istanbul. Its exact year of publication is not known, although the sources attest it between 1878 and 1881;²³ Ulqinaku probably did not want to be found out by the Ottoman authorities.

Tahir Efendi Popoves (1856–1949) composed a further translation of the *Vesiletü'n-Necât* into Albanian, also using Arabic characters.²⁴ The exact date of publication is not known with certainty, as there is conflicting information about this work, although we know that the place of publication was Istanbul,²⁵ and that it was published with the permission of the Ottoman min-

19 Elsie, *Albanian Literature*, 38–42.

20 He was born in Korça at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, we do not have further information about him (Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 43–54).

21 Luli and Dizdari, *Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku*.

22 Hasan Rızâ Efendi was a Turkish poet and calligrapher, especially famous for his *Mevlit*. Cf. Özcan, "Hasan Rızâ Efendi, Said Paşa İmamı".

23 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 71–82.

24 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 261–69.

25 According to Mid'had Frashëri, this text would have been published in 1890; according to Abdullah Zajimi, it was published in the early twentieth century; according to Jashar

ister of education, at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁶ The distribution of Tahir Popova's version was mostly limited to Kosovo, and several versions of it in Latin characters have been made available since 1951.

The authors of these literary works probably chose to compose them using Arabic characters because Arabic was considered the language of Islam par excellence²⁷ and they wanted to maintain some connection with their Muslim backgrounds. In the same way, they used the Albanian language to signal their affiliation with nationalist aspirations. The combination of Albanian words written using Arabic characters supported their affirmation of a dual Albanian and Muslim identity.²⁸ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the question of which alphabet should be used reflected the Albanians' need for unification and their desire for emancipation. Several congresses took place, and their deliberations demonstrate the evolution of this question. The choice to be made was between the Arabic alphabet, which would have maintained a symbolic connection with the Ottoman Empire, and the Latin alphabet, a token of cultural separation from that empire.²⁹ The Congress of Manastir (14–18 November 1908) was unable to choose a single solution and instead opted for both Arabic and Latin alphabets. In 1909, the Young Turks organised a new congress in Dibra, which pushed for the adoption of the Arabic alphabet.³⁰ However, the use of the Arabic alphabet soon declined and became obsolete in the following years, once Albania declared its independence.³¹ This linguistic and political contention also affected the translation of *mevlud*.

The first Albanian-language *mevlud* written using Latin characters was published in 1900. The author was Hafëz Ali Korçe (1873–1957), one of the most important Islamic activists³² and scholars of the time,³³ who wrote several poems and lyrics about religion and linguistics. His text, originally written in the *Tosk* dialect and later republished in 1909, 1920, and 1944, drew inspiration

Rexhepagiq, this *mevlud* was published in 1873, and then republished in Kosovo in 1905. According to Nehat Krasniqi, Tahir Popova published the text in 1890. See Lumo, "Disa dorëshkrime shqipe", 286–89; Zajmi, "Një vepër shqipe e vjetit 1873", 117; Rexhepagiq, *Razvoj prosvete i školstva Albanske*, 43; Krasniqi, "Mevludet në letërsinë shqiptare me alfabet arab"; Kaleshi, "Mevludi Kod Arbanasa".

26 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 261–69.

27 Bria, "The Case of Albanian as an Islamic Language", 52–72.

28 Vezenkov, "The Albanian language question", 489–522.

29 Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening*, 378–80.

30 Clayer, "Bektachisme et nationalisme albanais", 287–90.

31 Gawrych, *The crescent and the eagle*, 160–170.

32 He was against any form of Islamic reformism, and in favour of the return to an original Islam; see Clayer, "Adapting Islam to Europe".

33 Ismail and Karjagdiu, *Hafiz Ali Korça*.

from the *Vesiletü'n-Necât*.³⁴ In 1909, Hafiz Mani, imam of the Kiras Mosque in Shkodër, decided to propose a version of Ulqinaku's *mevlud* in Arabic characters, in order to support the adoption of the Arabic alphabet and, therefore, the Islamic-Ottoman legacy. In Elbasan city in 1910 Sulejman Efendi produced a reduced version of Ulqinaku's work, in Latin characters to propose a "New Albanist Course".

This linguistic contention persisted after the declaration of Albanian independence in 1912, which brought the question of the relationship between religion, nationalism, and language to the fore.³⁵ Once again, this conflict also had an impact on the linguistic patterns of the *mevlud*. The Albanian nationalism that inspired the independence movement was of a marked secular/ecumenical character, and prioritised linguistic/ethnic identity over religion, although Islam was the majority confession of the country (whose population was 70 per cent Muslim, 20 per cent Orthodox Christian, and 10 per cent Catholic).³⁶ The building of the Albanian nation-state redefined the bases on which legitimacy was founded by the Islamic authorities and their institutional structures in the new territories: the relationship between tradition, modernity, and religion became a vital issue for all Muslims.³⁷ Within Muslim groups three intellectual currents emerged: "Orientalists", called "the Elders" (*Të Vjetër*), who prized continuity with Islam and its cultural background; "Occidentalists", called "the Youth" (*Të Rinjtë*), who called for the rejection of religion, especially of Islam, as a barbaric residual component of natural civil evolution; and the "Neo-Albanians/New Albanians" (*Neoshqiptarët*), who emphasised the importance of Albanian culture and essence beyond any religious division.³⁸

One of the main questions raised by the various currents concerned the nationalisation of the doctrine, terminology, and language of Albanian Islam; this was mostly supported by the "New Albanians", while the "Elders" wanted

34 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 341–52.

35 Clayer, "De la presse institutionnelle à la presse prosélyte".

36 According to Nathalie Clayer, three factors motivated this formative process: the presence of different religious confessions in the country (Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims); the diffusion of positivist ideas among patriots; and, finally, the independence of the Bektashiyya as a religious community. In this way, at least formally, the state rationalised the relationship between the different religious communities according to a secular institutional framework: this approach was adopted from the birth of the Albanian nation, when the High Council of Regence was composed of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Bektashis. Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*, 703–8; Morozzo della Rocca, *Nazione e religione in Albania (1920–1944)*; Basha, *Islam në Shqipëri gjatë shekujve*, 119–39; Popovic, *L'islam balkanique*.

37 Clayer, "Tasavvuf, Music and Social Change".

38 Clayer, "Tasavvuf, Music and Social Change".

to maintain continuity with the Ottoman past. In 1925, the Kemalist reforms severed Turkey's ties with the former Ottoman regions,³⁹ and this effectively required the nationalisation of Islam outside Turkey, with many doctrinal and literary consequences. Numerous chants (*ilahi*) and religious texts were translated into the new Latin-alphabet Albanian language, or adapted to it. In this context, the translation of a *mevlud* into Latin characters was preferred and became an important occasion for the dissemination of a national ideology and for the legitimisation and consolidation of religious authority. Several religious leaders composed new *mevluds* or translated the work of Çelebi into Albanian in order to underline their reverence for God and for the Albanian nation. In Chicago in 1920, Shefki Hoxha (1900–1981), from Strugë, published a partial translation of the *Vesiletü'n-Necât*;⁴⁰ in 1924, Hafiz Abdullah Zëmbaku (1892–1960) wrote a version of the *mevlud*,⁴¹ first published in Korça,⁴² which was then republished several times.⁴³ Zëmbaku attended courses in the Fatih *madrase*, called *Dar ül-Hilafe*, and he undertook religious studies at the University of Istanbul; in the Ottoman capital he was initiated into the Naqshbandî Sufi path. Starting in 1921, he taught in the *madrase* in Korça and the school in Kuç-Belorta.⁴⁴ Zëmbaku was one of the most prolific Islamic entrepreneurs in interwar Albania, through his publications – some thirty titles, including Qur'ānic commentaries and *ḥadīth* translations – but also via his preaching throughout Albania, and his teaching of Islam and of the Albanian language.⁴⁵ He also wrote a *mevlud* in Albanian, distributing it through his religious and social networks.⁴⁶ Sheh Ahmet Shkodër (1881–1927), a famous Rifā'ī Sufi, also composed an Albanian version of the *mevlud*, which was published in 1922 in Arabic and in 1926 in Latin script.⁴⁷ In 1933, Hafiz Said Ulqinaku of Lezhë prepared a complete version of Ali Ulqinaku's *mevlud*, using the Latin script, which slightly reformulated the original version. In 1934, Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliut wrote a book about the Prophet Muḥammad.⁴⁸

These texts mostly concern religious themes, without dwelling on nationalist values or patriotic epics. Nevertheless, the linguistic reshaping of the

39 About Mustafa Kemal's secular reforms see Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*.

40 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 31–19.

41 Ismail, *Mevludi te shqiptarët manifestim apo ibadet*, 75–82.

42 Sëmbakut, *Mevludi*.

43 It was republished in 1924 and in 1931 in Korça and in 1991 in Michigan. Cf. Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 371–89.

44 Safeti, "Hafiz Abdullah Zëmbaku-Figurë e nderuar e islamizmit në Shqipëri", 3.

45 Clayer, "Transnational Connections".

46 Zëmbaku, *Mevlud Par "Nuri Ahmedija"*.

47 Luli and Bujar, *Jeta dhe veprimtaria e Sheh Ahmed Shkodrës*, 9–29.

48 Zekay, *Zhvillimi i kulturës islame*, 309–12.

Albanian-language *mevlud* blended a Muslim identity into the nationalist project: Islamic authorities nationalised such poems as expressions of an Islamic literary culture that was typically “Albanian”. Furthermore, the circulation of *mevlud* also legitimised Sunnī authority among Muslims who were learning the new standard Albanian language: for them, *mevlud* meant both national identity and divine blessing.

9.2 Official *Mevlud* Celebrations

King Zog,⁴⁹ who came to power in 1925, rationalised and institutionalised the relationship between state and religion, effectively promoting the autonomous constitution of the various Muslim communities (confessionalisation): the Bektashiyya, after having actively participated in the nationalist project, were recognised by the Albanian state as an independent religious community (Bektashis);⁵⁰ the Sunnī community created the Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë (KMSH; Islamic Community of Albania); the Rifāʿiyya, Qādiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, Tijāniyya, and Saʿdiyya Sufi brotherhoods formed the Drita Hyjnore (Holy Light) Association; and the Halvetiyya created its own Liga Aleviane (Alevian League).⁵¹

During this period, some reformist *ʿulamāʾ*, and the Tijāniyya in Shkodër district, instigated a strong cultural revival within Sunnī institutions; this also refreshed Muslim political and social associations. One of the main aims of the Sunnī community was to standardise and control liturgical and ritual forms of worship, under national rule, for all Muslims. In this way, Muslim authorities were able to shape a nationalist and militant Islam that could engage with the state-building process. For this reason, starting in the 1930s, these authorities called for the adoption of one or more texts of the *mevlud* by the nation’s mosques. Ulqinaku’s text became the most widely used *mevlud* in Shkodër district (northern Albania); while in central-southern areas many Muslim communities adopted Korça’s *mevlud*, or the text by Zëmblaku.

Thus, Sunnī authorities directly proposed the *mevlud* as the main form of veneration of the Prophet, one that allowed Albanians to express their piety in two distinct ways. The first, public, mode, organised and implemented by the

49 Ahmet Lekë Bej Zog (known as Zog I Scanderbeg III, King of the Albanians) was an Albanian politician and soldier, Prime Minister of Albania (1922–24), President of the Albanian Republic (1925–28), and King of Albania (1928–39).

50 Clayer, “Bektachisme et nationalisme albanais”, 287–90.

51 Clayer, “La Kadiyye en Albanie”, 236–40.

religious authorities, provided a specific form of ceremonial veneration during the five holy nights.⁵² The second, mostly relegated to the private sphere, included the chanting of one or more parts of the *mevlud* during family events such as births or funerals.⁵³ The first ritual form was governed and controlled by the Sunnī and Sufi authorities, as the official and public cult of the Prophet; the private singing ritual assumed more intimate traits, sometimes disconnected from official discourse, which reworked the feeling of love and veneration towards the Prophet, and incorporated it into family and communal life.

In Shkodër district, Ulqinaku's *mevlud* was used as part of the celebratory protocol for the five holy nights: the birth of the Prophet, the *Regaib* (the beginning of the pregnancy of the Prophet Muḥammad's mother), the *Miraxhi* (Muḥammad's ascension), the *Beraet* (forgiveness of sins), and the *Kadrit* (the Qur'ān's first appearance to the Prophet Muḥammad);⁵⁴ it was also used for the *Bayrami I vogel* (festival of breaking fast) and the *Bayrami I madhe* (feast of the sacrifice). This protocol included several elements drawn from the Ottoman ceremonial tradition:⁵⁵ during the five sacred nights and the two *bajrams*, it called for candles to be lit in the mosques while some Muslims recited a part of the *mevlud* before the night prayer (*ṣalāt al-‘ishā’*).⁵⁶ The celebration of the Prophet's birthday followed a different pattern: the ceremony began with the recitation of a passage from the Qur'ān, followed by official discourse from the organisers and the director of the celebrations, usually the mufti or imam of the mosque. The ceremony continued with the introduction of the *mevlud* prayers, three *salavat* and redemption prayers; then the first piece of the *mevlud* was sung, then three *salavat* and one or two *ilahi*; then the second part of the *mevlud* was sung, then two times three *salavat* and one or two *ilahi*. The third part of the *mevlud* was then sung, followed by three *salavat*, one *ilahi* and the recitation of a part of the Qur'ān or another poem dedicated to the Prophet. The fourth part of the *mevlud* was then sung, followed by three *salavat*, and one or two *ilahi*. Then the fifth part of the *mevlud* closed the ceremony. This could be followed by voluntary recitation of another five or seven verses of the Qur'ān.⁵⁷

In the *madrase* of Shkodër and Tirana, teachers taught these sung *mevlud* recitations to their students, although transmission was otherwise mostly informal or hereditary. This contributed to the creation of a group of singers

52 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118–21.

53 Krasnici, “Dimensioni Kulturor i mevludit”.

54 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118–26.

55 Bozkurt, “Kandil”.

56 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118–26.

57 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118–26.

(mostly men) who specialised in this art (*bylbyla të mevludit*) which means 'Mevlud Nightingales', especially in the Shkodër district, where Ulqinaku's *mevlud* was widespread. Among these singers, Hafiz Muhamet Gogoli (1890–?), Hafiz Xhevdet Zylja (1905–92), Hysni Halil Puka (1908–67), and Hafiz Xhemal Sait Çanga (1913–79) were famous for their mastery of *mevlud* recitation.⁵⁸

According to Haxhi Sami Muçej,⁵⁹ domestic celebrations did not follow the same procedures as the public events: only one or two parts of the text were sung at family gatherings, re-elaborating public ritual practice within the private space. For example, in Shkodër, families invited the *bylbyla* to recite the *mevlud* on special occasions such as weddings, births, and funerals; this facilitated the social diffusion of the practice, and of Ulqinaku's text, in the Shkodër region.⁶⁰ The singing of *mevlud* thus became a medium to recall the Prophet, as an example and pious model par excellence, and a means of intercession with God's infinite divine mercy. The singing also assumed a beneficial and soteriological value: the *mevlud* was sung to bless a new house, a marriage, a birth, a funeral. Singing in an acoustically sensitive manner was required in order to create and shape a cognitive and emotional space, which inevitably forged the perception of the self. Several testimonies report the emotional involvement of participants during the singing of the *bylbyla*. This practice was the main form of veneration of the Prophet, expressing and embodying piety, and the love felt by the faithful for the Prophet. Families and religious communities tended to sing the version of the *mevlud* that was put forward by their local religious authorities. The text by Ulqinaku was mostly used for Shkodër district; in central-southern Albania, Korça's text and Zëmbblaku's *mevlud* predominated; several Sufi communities sang Shkodër's *mevlud*. Thus, the religious authorities succeeded in modulating the religious behaviour of the faithful.

9.3 Communist Secularisation and Post-Socialist Revival

The rise of the Albanian Communist Party, after the Second World War and the end of Italian and German dominion, radically changed institutional structures and religious practices, beginning with gradually increasing attacks against any form of religion. The party leader and dictator, Enver Hoxha,⁶¹ who

58 This information derives from the statements of Haxhi Sami Muçej, who studied and taught at the Shkodër *madrase*. Cf. Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118.

59 Vehbi, "Parathënie", 9–10.

60 Vehbi, "Parathënie", 9–10.

61 Enver Halil Hoxha was an Albanian Communist politician who served as head of the state of Albania from 1944 until his death in 1985; he was the First Secretary of the Party of

studied in France and actively participated in patriotic resistance during the Second World War, claimed to be applying Marxist theories to collectivising the national economy and fully rationalising Albanian culture. In his vision, religious values were mere obstacles to “cultural progress”.⁶² Hoxha aimed to merge the religious and political fields, eradicating any transcendent reference except for the cult of his own personality and the cultural progress of the Albanian nation. Indeed, several scholars assert that Hoxha's atheism was derived from the secular and positivist patterns of earlier Albanian nationalism.⁶³ In any case, this process of radical secularisation, enforced by a dense network of political and social control, began immediately after the Second World War and gradually eroded religious rituals, and religion itself, in both the public and the private sphere. In January 1949, almost three years after the adoption of the first Communist constitution (which guaranteed freedom of religion), the government issued a far-reaching Decree on Religious Communities. Religious institutions were forbidden to have anything to do with the education of the youth, which was made the exclusive province of the state. All religious communities were prohibited from owning property, and from operating philanthropic and welfare institutions and hospitals. The government also removed the criminal penalties applicable to anyone offending against the guarantee of freedom of religion in the Albanian Criminal Code. In a speech in February 1967 the leader of the Communist Party in Albania encouraged the youth movement nationwide, called Red Guards, to close churches and mosques. On 13 November 1967, decree no. 4337 officially cancelled the legal status of religion. Articles 37, 49, and 55 of the constitution stipulated the state atheism of the country. Decree no. 225 had already ordered the replacement of city and village names having religious origins by Albanian names; ultimately, Decree no. 5339 obliged citizens who had names of religious origin to change their names. Besides these prohibitions, atrocities committed against religious leaders and places were numerous: many priests, imams, and shaykhs were jailed, exiled, or killed as enemies of the nation.⁶⁴ Rituals were forbidden, and practitioners were severely punished by arrest or exile. This environment of fear, which went along with socialist propaganda in the media and positivist indoctrination, erased religious culture and practices almost completely. Many young people were socialised by their anti-religious and positivist education. Government institutions were used to track down

Labour of Albania. He was chairman of the Democratic Front of Albania and commander-in-chief of the armed forces from 1944 until his death. For his biography, see Fevziu, *Enver Hoxha*.

62 Karataş, “State-Sponsored Atheism”.

63 O'Donnell, *A Coming of Age*, 115–20.

64 Frey, “Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania”.

those people who continued to practise rituals during holy periods such as Ramadan.⁶⁵ Religious texts were banned, Qur'āns were burned, and the owners of religious texts were imprisoned for up to eight years. Under regime repression, the celebration of the *mevlud* also gradually faded: there was no possibility of celebrating it in the mosques, all of which had been closed. Some Albanians tried to sing the *mevlud* in their homes, for the usual celebrations of personal and family events.⁶⁶ The regime's police, however, controlled and repressed any form of worship, especially in urban centres, jailing or exiling the offenders. Here is an account from a sixty-year-old dervish from Korça:

My grandparents used to read the *mevlud* when a child was born, they read a part on a piece of paper ... it was a good thought ... in 1971, we sang to celebrate the birth of my cousin. The day after, my grandfather was arrested and whipped ... I did not hear the *mevlud* anymore.⁶⁷

This brief testimony illustrates how control by the party police worked in Albania. In former Yugoslavia, where the regime's secularisation was less rigorous, some authors published new editions of the *mevlud* texts, especially in Macedonia and the Kosovan region of Prizren.⁶⁸ In Albania, religious memories of the practice of *mevlud* disappeared; essentially, younger people knew nothing or almost nothing about religious practices.

After the implosion of the Albanian regime in 1990, the country set out on a new political and economic course: Albanians had to redefine their identity and rediscover the world after many years of isolation. The end of the ban on religion and of the party's political monopoly opened the way for political and religious pluralism.⁶⁹ On the other hand, people were confused by the sudden and overwhelming impact of capitalism and globalisation; this changed their vision of the world, their own self-perception, and even their conception of time and space. The post-socialist and neo-pluralist secularisation that then occurred favoured the development of individualised and critical attitudes towards the traditional religious authorities that were involved in the institutional reconstruction of religions: the Islamic community of Albania was

65 In many public places, such as schools and factories, forbidden (*ḥarām*) foods (dairy products, meat, etc.) were distributed at these times of fasting. People who refused to eat these foods were denounced. See Frey, "Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania".

66 Tönnies, "Religious Persecution in Albania".

67 Interview, November 2014, Tirana.

68 See Veliu, *Mevludi Ditëlindja e Muhamedit*; Zejnullah, *Mevlud Sherif ne gjuhën shqip*.

69 Clayer, "God in the 'Land of the Mercedes'".

trying to forge the image of a secular, moderate, and nationalist Islam;⁷⁰ the Bektashis claimed a monopoly on Albanian mysticism,⁷¹ marginalising other Sufi brotherhoods. At the same time, new religious actors (Wahhābīs, Turkish foundations, Iranian networks) also sought to proselytise in, and enrol neophytes from, the newly opened Albanian religious space. According to Nathalie Clayer, the interweaving of these processes created a triple dynamic of revival: one revival from above, by the Albanian religious authorities; one from the outside, through the new religious actors from abroad; and, finally, one from below, through the faithful themselves.⁷² The intertwining of these dynamics and the competition between these actors fragmented a post-socialist religious field that was still controlled by the state and dominated by the secular-nationalist discourses that characterised the public sphere. In this context, some rituals, such as the *zīyāra* (visits to Sufi shrines),⁷³ became a means for individual or communal construction of alternative religiosities, detached from the religion proposed by the official religious authorities.⁷⁴ This created a division between the daily religious behaviour of the faithful and the actions of the religious authorities.⁷⁵

The same dynamic affected the celebrations of *mevlud* in many different ways. By the time of the fall of the regime, the practice had almost disappeared: only the elders were able to sing or recite the *mevlud*, because propaganda and Communist control had interrupted the reproduction of religious memory. The Islamic community of post-Communist Albania tried to rebuild the cult with the help of these elderly custodians of memory and by republishing previously banned texts. Once the mosques were reopened, the Sunnī authorities initially participated in *mevlud* celebrations in Ulqin, Montenegro, in 1992 and in Prizren, Kosovo, in 1993.⁷⁶ In 1995, the Islamic community organised a public recitation of the *mevlud* on the occasion of the *Bayrami i madhe*, during a concert organised in Shkodër, in which the former president of the republic, Sali Berisha, took part.⁷⁷ The concert was performed by nine soloists, six actors, twenty-four orchestral players, and fifty-eight singers. The Secretary of the Islamic Community Sabri Koçi and the Grand Mufti of Shkodër Haxhi Faik

70 Endresen, "Faith, Fatherland or Both?"

71 Clayer, "L'islam balkanique aujourd'hui".

72 Clayer, "God in the 'Land of the Mercedes'".

73 In Albania, *zīyāra* refers to pious visitation: pilgrimage to a holy place, tomb, or shrine that commemorates a Sufi saint.

74 Scigliano and Bria, "Harem".

75 Elbasani and Roy, "Islam in the Post-Communist Balkans".

76 Luli and Dizdari, *Mevludet në gjuhën shqipe*, 118.

77 Muka, "Mbi koncertin festiv të Kurban Bajramit në Shkodër", 4.

Hoxha participated in the event. The organiser was a certain Adnan Muka, who gained the support of two of the surviving *bylbyla*, Xhavit Ujkani and Nazmi Lishi, to replicate the ceremonial they had taken part in during the interwar period. The event was repeated in Shkodër on the occasion of the *Bayrami i vogël*, in 1996.⁷⁸ In 1997, the concert was held in Skopje (Albanian Shkup), Macedonia, following the same procedures and involving the Macedonian Muslim authorities. The organiser of this event was Bahri Aliu, secretary of the madrasa of Skopje, with the help of the Albanian Sunnī authorities.⁷⁹ This concert, like the Kosovar and Montenegrin celebrations, quite clearly evoked the ideal of a brotherhood among all Albanian speakers in Greater Albania (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro) that had arisen after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

The recitation of *mevlud* increasingly became a public and political event, one that affirmed nationalist belonging or conveyed other political messages. From about 2000, such events gradually developed into general meetings and symposia about the political and scientific meaning of the *mevlud*. The boundaries between religious ritual, political meeting, and scientific symposium became blurred, merging scientific intentions, political claims, and spiritual references during the *mevlud* week. This phenomenon, which is sometimes described as a “rationalisation of faith”,⁸⁰ involves the whole religious field (see below, on Bektashis during the *nevrus*). It also highlights the legacy of positivist and socialist ideology, as the rational-scientific framework is supposed to reassure and legitimise both religious and political authorities. For this reason, the *mevlud* of the Prophet was celebrated by politicians, religious leaders, and university professors together, as academic science was still considered to represent “true knowledge” about religion, and the ultimate source of truth. The *mevlud* was almost stripped of its religious significance, instead assuming meanings that were primarily scientific and political; several politicians and religious leaders exploited the event to reaffirm their commitment to reason and to the nation. The singing of *mevlud*, accompanied by children, was used to give an artistic dimension to such events. The apogee of this type of meeting was the Pristina convention in April 2009, at which academic scholars and religious leaders met to discuss the place of the *mevlud* among Albanians.⁸¹ This occasion was used to dwell upon brotherhood among all Albanians, to celebrate *mevlud* as the “highest form of veneration of the Prophet”,⁸² and

78 Muka, “Mbi koncertin festiv të Kurban Bajramit në Shkodër”, 1–2.

79 Dizdari, “Mbresa nga spektakli”, 4.

80 See Clayer, “L’Islam balkanique aujourd’hui”.

81 See Resul, “Fjala Hyrëse”.

82 Fahrush, “Fillet e festimit të Ditëlindjes së Pejgamberit a.s.”.

as the “best literary production of all Albanians”.⁸³ The proceedings of this conference were published a few years later, in order to spread its ecumenical and patriotic message. However, this was not the only editorial initiative connected with the *mevlud*. In order to regain its historical memory, the Islamic community of Albania began strongly to support the writing of biographies of prominent Albanian Islamic scholars, including Korça, who is presented as one of the fathers of Albanian Islam.⁸⁴ Alongside the promotion of a collection of patriotic poetry, the community also advocated the spread of Korça's *mevlud*, as “an honour for the Albanian nation”.⁸⁵

The anniversary of the Prophet's birth is at present not much celebrated in the mosques managed by the KMSH. In 2017 and 2018, during the week of the *mevlud*, the imam of the main mosque of Tirana just reminded the faithful of the day of the Prophet's birth, without organising any particular celebration.⁸⁶ The tradition seems to continue only in Shkodër, albeit with some difficulty; in 2015 and 2016, the Grand Mufti of Shkodër organised candlelight celebrations of the *mevlud*, sung by some *bylbyla* elders, but participation was rather low.⁸⁷ In this field, the success of the KMSH, which has aimed to carve out a place in a public sphere dominated by secular-nationalist discourses, and at the same time to build an image of a patriotic, democratic, and moderate Islam encompassing all Muslim Albanians, has been modest.

9.4 Diversification of Piety

The progressive secularisation of the *mevlud* corresponded to the gradual disappearance of the practice among the faithful, especially after the elders who still remembered the living ritual had passed away. In the 1990s it was possible to find families who still invited the *bylbyla* to sing the *mevlud*, but from the 2000s singers were increasingly difficult to find. In 2014, at the time of the fieldwork for the present chapter, only a few of the mosques performed *mevlud*, and the imam of the main mosque in Tirana said: “Let's sing the *mevlud* during funerals, and if they ask for it ... we will read a part of Ulqinaku's *mevlud*.”⁸⁸ In Peshkopia, a young believer who was interviewed while he was returning home from the mosque replied: “I do not know ... Yes, the imam said that

83 Hamiti, *Mevludi*, 121–29.

84 The KMSH organised a symposium to consecrate him in Kavaja in August 2017: see <https://bit.ly/2PyXzbE>.

85 See about him Ismail and Karjagdiu, *Hafiz Ali Korça*.

86 I personally attended the event and collected this information.

87 See www.kbi-bujanoc.com/?m=post&id=1904 and <https://bit.ly/3zSXFoP>.

88 Interview, December 2016, Tirana.

yesterday was the anniversary of the Prophet, but I do not know about rituals, celebrations, or anything else.”⁸⁹

Today’s Albanians appear to feel little need to recite the *mevlud*, and some even seem to reject the practice. In the post-socialist period, a number of Arab missionaries have financed the construction of mosques and recruited young Albanians to study in their religious institutes.⁹⁰ Although Wahhābī proselytism has never really caught on among Albanian Muslims, a certain scripturalist approach has nevertheless spread to urban and even some rural areas, due to the indoctrination of local imams who studied in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. These religious leaders, having been ignored by the KMSH, formed the League of Imams in Albania (Lidhja e Hoxhallarëve të Shqipërisë), which has several mosques in the country.⁹¹ According to a statement by the league about the *mevlud*:

love towards him does not mean celebrating his birthday and singing in verse, but accurately implementing his life. Love of the Prophet Muḥammad (*alejhissalatu uesselam*) manifests itself in two main ways: pursuit of his path and resurrection of the Prophetic tradition ... So, if we really want to get out of the serious situation into which Islam has fallen today, to return to authority and to the prestige of that time, we must not corrupt this noble religion with useless celebrations.⁹²

This statement demonstrates the refusal to celebrate the *mevlud* or any other form of veneration linked to the Prophet. A twenty-five-year-old man who regularly attends one of the mosques belonging to the League of Imams, in Rruga Kavaja in Tirana, stated that: “In Islam there are no such things ... simply, we do not do it.”⁹³ Imams use the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīths* of Bukhārī to legitimise their anti-*mevlud* conception, exploiting the discursive authority of Prophetic traditions. The attitude towards the practice of *mevlud* is, however, strongly influenced by an increasing integration, especially of young people, into the virtual *umma*, where they are exposed to Islamic principles and doctrines that are increasingly standardised and homogenised in order to be easily understandable and adaptable to all those who may make use of these online resources.⁹⁴ In this highly dynamic space, the norms and practices of Islam are

89 Interview, December 2016, Peshkopia.

90 See Bria, “L’Islam Balcanico”.

91 Endresen, “Faith, Fatherland or Both?”.

92 Tërniqi, “Profeti Muhamd (A. A.)”.

93 Interview, December 2016, Tirana.

94 Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma*, 54–56.

universalised and formatted through a process of emphasis and negotiation to make them easily available to interconnected individuals,⁹⁵ and there is no longer room for local and more traditional forms of religious culture. This has contributed to the creation of a doctrinal corpus that excludes some rituals, such as *mevlud*, thereby preventing its reinstatement in Albania; instead, the *mevlud* is considered to be merely an ancient tradition, or a corruption of the original Islam.

On the other hand, the Bektashi authorities have tried to encourage the spread of other religious rituals instead, such as the *nevrur* on 22 March each year.⁹⁶ In the post-socialist period, Bektashi leaders promoted a new national, scientific, and intellectual Bektashi creed.⁹⁷ The statute published in 2000, following the Seventh Congress of the Community, outlined a progressive, humanist, ecumenical, and nationalist Bektashism, which would represent a third way between Christianity and Islam, dedicated to the application of the *sharī'a* and the spread of tolerant Islamic mysticism.⁹⁸ Broadcasting, publications, and the official community magazine, *Ūrtësia* (Wisdom), allowed a partial diffusion of Bektashi ideology and doctrine. Although its leaders set up public events, such as the *nevrur*, that had a ritual-religious background, these merged Bektashism, scientific communications, national motifs, and the posthumous sanctification of Bektashi holy figures. As quoted in *Urtësia*, the *nevrur* means the natural spring, and human rebirth against cultural darkness.⁹⁹ It is an organic-biological rebirth: plants and animals flourish anew. It is also a religious rebirth: the *nevrur* is the birthday of Imam 'Alī in the Ka'ba. Furthermore, the reference to 'Alī favoured collaboration with certain Iranian (Shī'a) para-governmental networks, which subsequently offered cultural and social support.¹⁰⁰ The *nevrur* thus represents one of the most important religious events of the year for many Albanians, much more than the *mevlud* of the Prophet, whose very existence is now unknown to many people.

95 Cf. Roy, *L'islam mondialisé*, 127–32.

96 It is important to note that since Ottoman times the *nevrur* had been celebrated by all Albanian *ṭuruq* to commemorate 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib's birthday.

97 See Clayer, "L'islam balkanique aujourd'hui".

98 *Statuti i Komunitetit Bektashian*, 3.

99 See *Urtësia* 118 (April 2017).

100 From 1995 to 1996, contacts with Shī'a missionaries, who shared the beliefs common between the Shī'īs and the Bektashis, provided Shī'a literature to Bektashi leaders. The Iranian support was linked to a governmental strategy of expansion of political and economic power in the Balkan area. In any case, this link never affected Bektashi confessional and political autonomy. Some Alevi networks also offered support to the Bektashi community, providing icons and images about the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) that did not ever influence Bektashi goals. Cf. Bria and Mayerà, "The Alide Iconography".

During the celebration of the *nevrruz* in Tirana, a twenty-year-old student said: "I do not know what it [the *mevlud*] is ... My family is Bektashi, we celebrate the two *bajrams* and the *nevrruz* for my grandmother."¹⁰¹ This statement could have been made by any number of people on the streets of Albania, a country where the recall and reproduction of ritual and doctrinal religious knowledge today seem largely to be only residual. The secularising effect of the Communist regime, and then the doctrinal and cultural flattening brought about by globalisation, have greatly contributed to eroding awareness of the practices around *mevlud*. The Sufi brotherhoods, which elsewhere appear to be among the main promoters of the rite, are substantially marginalised in Albania, by the Bektashi esoteric monopoly and by other competition in the fragmented religious field. Many Albanian Sufi communities decided to join or aspire to the "Bektashi way", as the main model of Albanian mysticism, and therefore do not celebrate the *mevlud*, instead emphasising the celebration of other festivals such as *nevrruz*¹⁰² and 'āshūrā'. A few Sufis occasionally recite the *mevlud*, but mostly for particular and partisan reasons; for example, Sheh Qemali of the Rifā'iyya, in Tirana, recites the *mevlud* of Shkodër with his disciples, but merely to legitimise his own mystical initiatic chain (*silsila*).¹⁰³

In recent years, foreign actors have initiated a partial revival of the *mevlud* ritual in Albania. In Shkodër, for example, the *madrase* of the КМШ, led by a Turkish Naqshbandī foundation, celebrated the birthday of the Prophet in November 2016,¹⁰⁴ although even in this case the event had a purely political meaning, without providing any sort of religious ritual. The ritual is not celebrated in the other *madrase* of the country, managed by the Gülen foundation,¹⁰⁵ even if the teaching of the *mevlud* text is included in school programmes for educational and pedagogical reasons. At Bedër University, still managed by Gülen networks, students of Islamic theology also study *mevlud*, for similar purposes and as part of literary studies.

In Dürres, however, a Sufi community led by a Syrian shaykh named Hassan proposed the revival of *mevlud* among the local population. Hassan moved

¹⁰¹ Interview, December 2016, Tirana.

¹⁰² About Nevruz celebrations in Albania see Bria, "Celebrating Sultan Nevruz", 355–377.

¹⁰³ Interview, December 2014, Tirana.

¹⁰⁴ The author personally attended the event and collected this information.

¹⁰⁵ Muḥammad Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi (b. 1941) is a Turkish preacher, former imam, writer, and political figure. He is the founder of the Gülen movement (known as Hizmet, meaning service, in Turkish), which is 3–6 million strong in Turkey and has an empire of affiliated banks, media companies, construction companies, and schools, especially those providing primary and secondary education, in Turkey (in which business entities and foundations have been closed down by the Turkish government by the thousands in 2017) and in Africa, Central Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

to Albania after the beginning of the Syrian War, thanks to the support of an Albanian disciple, Saimir Bulku, whom he met in Aleppo. In Dürres, the shaykh, who follows the Rifāʿī path, quickly created a community of disciples from all over Albania who recognise him as representing “authentic Sufism”. He named his community *Dielli i zemrave* (*Shemes El-kulub*, the sun of the heart), and is believed to be a descendant of the Prophet. Hassan thus proposes a Sufism of Arabian origin, tied to a form of veneration of the Prophet that differs from the ‘Alī-oriented piety shared by Albanian and Kosovar Sufi brotherhoods. In this context, in December 2017, the new Sufi community organised *mevlud* celebrations at the International Hotel in Tirana, inviting the population to participate. The event attracted massive participation by the faithful, who listened to the words of the shaykh: “Let us not forget that the Prophet Muḥammad is the heart of Islamic mercy ... everything starts from him. Today is his anniversary, as Muslims we must pray and sing for him.”¹⁰⁶ These words of Hassan gain in importance if we consider that there were no other official *mevlud* celebrations in that year. In his own way, he wanted to assert his position and fill a vacuum in the religious field. In fact, the event included a recitation of Zëmlaku’s *mevlud* by Bulku accompanied by some (mostly elderly) singers. Bulku, as the imam of the main mosque of Dürres, also tries to encourage the recitation of *mevlud* among the faithful: “Few people know the *mevlud* ... I try to propose it because it is beautiful, because my grandparents did so ... if someone calls me for a birth I sing the *mevlud* ... if someone calls me for a funeral I sing the part of the *mevlud* for the funeral.”¹⁰⁷ Bulku therefore recognises how limited the extent of this practice is among today’s Albanians, and tries to widen its appeal. On other occasions he has invited elders to sing the *mevlud* inside the Dürres Mosque: they sang *mevlud* with him from a printed text, as they did not remember the words. Bulku intends to re-establish the veneration of the Prophet, which in Albania has mostly been secularised by the strategies of KMSH or obscured by the ‘Alī-oriented celebrations of the Bektashis.

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter proposed an analysis of *mevlud*, as both a text and a ritual practice, and of its gradual integration into the normative and semantic frameworks of the secular discourses that have dominated in Albanian nationalism. The expression of the *mevlud* in Albanian literary and linguistic patterns

106 The author personally attended the event and collected this information.

107 Interview, May 2018, Dürres.

was part of a process of state- and nation-building whereby Muslim scholars aimed to shape an identity that was equally Albanian and Islamic. The inter-war period saw *mevlud* being treated in two distinct ways: as an expression of Sunnī Islamic piety in a pluralist and confessionalised Albania, and as a political symbol of the nation, and the language and literary heritage of its fathers; these different dimensions were used to forge an Albanian Sunnī Islam that was used by the faithful as their main means of venerating the Prophet during this period. This also facilitated the emergence in interwar Albania of the *mevlud* as an emotional and performative medium for Muslim religiosity, a development that was similar to what happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the *mevlud* was a crucial expression of Muslim religiosity, especially for women.

However, under post-war Communism radical socialist secularisation virtually wiped out the Albanian people's practical and literary memories of the *mevlud*. The regime's propaganda and control tools affected religious semantics and terminology, suppressing cognitive mnemonic reproduction. In post-socialist times, the legacy of socialist secular rationalism remained highly influential: the *mevlud* was virtually ignored by people who grew up in a secularised and positivist environment. Indeed, the proselytism of Salafī networks, growing integration into the virtual *umma*, and the spread of scripturalist interpretations of Islam have devalued local rituals, and have prevented a resurgence of the *mevlud*. Sunnī authorities eventually reinstated the ritual, but gradually emptied it of religious significance by saturating it with political and rationalist rhetoric, until the rite was almost destroyed. The *mevlud* thus became merely a political ritual for the affirmation of national consciousness, Albanian brotherhood, and democracy. It lost support from the faithful, who prefer to express their religiosity in different ways, sometimes distancing themselves from religious authorities, as with the *ziyāra* festivities. On the other hand, Bektashis claim to embrace Albanian religious piety, and private and public rites (*nevrur*) that encourage the faithful to express their doctrine. Only the Sufi community in Dürres proposes the celebration of *mevlud* as a festival and means of expression of Islamic devotion: their social impact, however, is minimal.

In this context the substance of the *mevlud* disappeared from the corpus of Prophetic devotions, remaining only as a literary heritage, and as a memory of the Albanian resurgence, something that Sunnī authorities can use to reaffirm their patriotic belonging. The veneration of the Prophet has shifted to other forms and media, and it is often expressed without the mediation of religious experts. Muḥammadan spirituality has thus become internalised by the faithful, who venerate the Prophet according to their own personal and individual

interpretation; on the other hand, the rationalist legacy and the global Salafist format have framed new forms of religiosity that seem to have lost any emotional pattern.

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