

God in the Eagles' Country: the Bektashi Order

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Originated from Sufi movements that took place in the Middle East in the 11th and 12th centuries, the Bektashi Order founds in Albania his *Torch Land*. Strictly affected by the history of the country, after a period of great political importance during the disintegration of Ottoman Empire, the Order was completely banned by the Communist Regime, when Albania became the only atheist state in the world. Anyway, thanks to the secret practice and the Albania Bektashi Community in diaspora, the religion continued to be alive and spread among people, until when the Constitution of 1988 guarantees the freedom of belief and Bektashi regains his place in Albanian society. The Eagle's Country has recovered its long tradition of tolerance, with Bektashi believers, Sunnis Muslims and Christians praying all together in the Tomorri Mountain, the sanctuary of divine Gods.

*Land of Albania! Let me bend mine eyes
On thee, thou rugged nurse of savage men!
The Cross descends, thy minarets arise,
And the pale crescent sparkles in the glen,
Through many a cypress grove within each city's ken.*
Lord Byron

When Byron visited Albania in the 19th-century, he found hospitable people, tradition and a history as ancient as that of mankind. Albanians live in a country of rough mountains, high rocks, wide plateau and gorges full of snow. The history of Albania between East and West resembles a mountain eagle and a troubled sea. This place which Albanians call *Shqipëri* ("Land of the Eagle") and foreigners call "Albania", is a country with an ancient history and language boasting magnificent religious coexistence.

This text is focused on the theme of Albanians' religious beliefs, mainly the Bektashi faith. The Bektashi faith is considered equally with other religions and Albania is

the Bektashi World Centre. Bektashi is often described as the right religion for Albanians, as a bridge between Christians and Muslims. Albanians are often described as people with weak religious feelings. These ideas will be explored later. However, before dealing with the religions in Albania, it is important to take a look at Albania's history from antiquity up to the present day. Some events will probably provide a better understanding of the links that Albanians have with religion and, at the same time, show how historical moments have influenced their spiritual choices.

If we examine the era before the birth of Christ, we see that Albania was called

“Illyria”. Illyrians, according to Albanian or non-Albanian historians, were the descendants of Pellasge and Albanian ancestors who had inhabited the Balkan Peninsula in antiquity. At that time, people were polytheist and Illyrians worshipped many Gods starting with the Sun and ending up with the Stone. I mention the old Illyrians here because the rites of their belief in the sun, in the stone, in the land, and so on, are not only described in history books but still exist today in Albania. In *The Truth on Albania and the Albanians* the author Pashko Vasa (Albanian renaissance poet [1825-1892]) wrote about some old religious rites that existed before the time of Christians and Muslims. At that time, Albanian oaths similar to those of their ancestors were: *Për këtë gur* (“I swear by the stone”), *Për sytë e ballit* (“I swear by my eyes”), or *Për këtë qiell e dhe* (“I swear by this sky and by this land”). Although times have changed, even now we can hear people using these kinds of vows. Nowadays, most Albanians swear oaths to Ballem Sultan (*për atë Ballem Sulltan*) and Baba Tomorr, (*për Baba Tomorr*) or the Church of Laç (*për Kishën e Laçit*). Oaths were important institutions of Albanian traditional law. Albanians swore to prove they had not broken the law. It was well known that the making of a promise or oath between Albanians and non-Albanians was of great importance.

Later, after the given name Illyria, Albania became known as “Arbëri”. However, at that time concepts such as state or nationality were not well understood by the people. Albanians, despite the different names, were alike. Today’s Albanian language, the In-

do-European language, originates from antiquity. During the period when the country was known as Arbëri, it was invaded by the Ottoman Empire, which lasted five centuries. During this period many events occurred that had an impact on the religious life of Albanians. This was the time of George Kastrioti Scanderbeg, his struggles against the Turks and the prevention of the Ottoman armies from penetrating Christian Europe. This was also the time of Lek Dukagjini and his Canon.

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These two historical figures influenced and inspired Albanians in the following centuries. The figure of Scanderbeg inspired the Albanian people to fight for their independence and freedom. Lek Dukagjini is well-known for his canonical book of rules. Even today, mostly in northern Albania, the rules of Lek Dukagjini are functional and challenge the laws of the state. The Canon is an unwritten set of oral laws, recorded by Shtjefën Gjeçovi a century ago and today applied by the regional families in northern Albania, mostly Catholics. The blood feud, sanctioned in the Canon, is a major problem that has mostly overcome state law. But the Canon does not foster the blood feud; on the contrary, it inhibits it. The Canon is a set of rules that regulated how to live in the past but, unfortunately, today some of these rules are misunderstood. The Canon had quite an important role in the areas where it was



Holy Place of Bektashim in Martanesh, Albania.

applied and continues to be applied. It was a self-regulated law. Edith Durham's words¹ well define the Canon's impact on people's lives: "‘Leka said so...’ is a phrase that had more impact on people than ten commandments from God, while the predictions of imams or priests were worthless if they came into conflict with Lek Dukagjini's Canon."

The historical events continued with the struggle of Albanian people for freedom, which somehow even contributed to their religion. Albanians' relationship with God varied in different historical periods and was marked by the banning of religious beliefs

by the communist state after the Second World War. The rekindling of religion in Albanian hearts and the ability to pray to God without fear was made possible when the only atheist country in the world since 1967 was finally presented with democracy in the 1990s.

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There are four religious communities in Albania: Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim and

1. Edith Durham (1863-1944) was a British traveller, artist and writer who became famous for her anthropological accounts of life in Albania in the early 20th-century.

Bektashi. All these communities have always lived in admirable religious harmony by respecting the traditions and the religious celebrations of each faith. Albania has never had religious wars and Pashko Vasa's motto that "the Albanian's religion is Albanianism" is still true in terms of the tolerance that exists between the religious communities in this country.

One of the religious communities in Albania is Bektashi, which has its own history in the Albanian land that should be called the Torch Land of this belief. Haji Bektash Veli, the founder of Bektashism, predicted that the fire of this belief would flicker strongly during the history of mankind but would never be extinguished. Today, the Bektashi Community of Albania has its statute, and the first article states: "The Bektashi Community is an independent, non-political community consisting of the Bektashi clergy of all levels, and the faith in their belief and worshipping of The Creator find inspiration in the doctrine, traditions, rituals and holy religious, moral and philosophical rules of Bektashism."

The Bektashi Order

The Bektashi Order was not a structured organisation until the 15th-century, nearly two centuries after the death of Haji Bektash Veli, who was presumed to be the founder of Bektashism. However, the Bektashi Order of Dervishes originated in a large number

of Sufi movements which took place in the Middle East from the 11th-12th centuries.² At this time a large number of preceding missionaries known as the saints of Hoarsen went to Anatolia and led the way for other dervish groups, such as the Bektashis.³ This sect was named after Haji Bektash, who according to some sources was not the real founder but was a pastor and saint chosen in a later period. Horasen in Iran is presumed to be the origin of Haji Bektash and in the second half of the 13th-century he lived in Anatolia. Haji Bektash was the writer of *Vilajet-Name*, whose description brings to mind the pilgrim dervishes known as the Kalandar of Iran or Abdals of Anatolia in the 13th-14th centuries.⁴ Haji Bektash was considered the leader of Abdalla (Pîr-i of Abdalla) from the start of his religious activity.

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However, Bektashism in the form that we know today did not appear until the 16th-century. The individual responsible for establishing the existing structure of the Bektashi Order was Balim Sultan (d. 1516 CE), a man commonly referred to as Pîr-i Sâni or Second Founder.⁵ Since his time the order has been led by a Dede Baba, a great-grandfather, a man appointed to his position by a council of twelve Dede⁶

2. Doja, A., *Bektashizmi në Shqipëri*, Tirana, AHS, 2008, p. 19.

3. Ibid, p. 19

4. Ibid, p.20

5. Abiva, H., *Bektashism and Its Presence in Albanian Lands* (<http://bektashiorder.com/bektashism-in-albania>)

6. Ibid.

(literally “grandfather” or “kryegjysh” in the Albanian language, the highest grade in the Bektashi spiritual hierarchy). Balım Sultan (1473-1516), under the auspices of Sultan Bayazıt II, in 1501 became the leader of the Bektashi at the headquarters of Bektashism in the Haxhibektash village of Anatolia. He had control over everything and unified the Bektashi rules. As a result of this transformation, Balım Sultan was considered the second saint and second founder. In this period, the important role of the Bektashi Order intensified and it became one of the most influential sects in the Ottoman Empire, from the 17th to 18th-century.⁷ The followers of this sect had their impact on spreading the influence of Turks and Islam in countries occupied by the Empire.

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In this period, the institutionalisation of the Bektashi sect became even more well-known. There was a division in this sect between novices and masters and also a division based on hierarchy and level. The lower level was for casual believers (*muhib*), the second included the elected (*eren*) and after they were educated and accepted as novices they could become dervishes and then “fathers” (*baba* in Albanian). Before the religious leaders were appointed in this hierarchal order they would be formally selected by

the “grandfathers” (*dede* or *gjysh* [grandfather]) to whom they were obligated to show loyalty. The whole organisation was headed by a single leader, *Kryegjyshi* (grandfather), who was supported by key figures who were known as his caliphs.⁸

It should be noted that the main features of Bektashi religious rites lie in the purity of the heart and spirit of a person. Thus, the purity of Bektashi can be achieved without following the Sunni or Shiia forms of worship. The five pillars of Islam are not necessarily binding to Bektashism. The Qur’an is not interpreted literally by the Bektashi but, rather, explained allegorically. They sometimes prefer to hear verses of their poets that interpret the Holy Scripture. The Bektashi Order emphasises the purity of belief rather than external religious rites and also believes that salvation lies in following perfect examples such as Imam Ali, Haji Bektash and other saints. Three moral rules of Bektashism are good, moral behaviour and good deeds, (*eline, diline, beeline*). These are general orientations claiming that the greatest divinity can be ensured only through a continuous pursuit of excellent morality in everyday life.⁹

To better understand the essence of Bektashism we refer to the words of Huseyin Abiva, who said: “Since the time of Balım Sultan in the 16th-century, the essence of Bektashi thought can be best summed up as follows: Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, occupies a predominant position in their spirituality; Ali is seen as the mirror image of the Divine; he is the revealer of the esoteric Qur’an, while the

7. Doja, A., *op. cit.*, p. 24

8. Doja, A., *Bektashizmi në Shqipëri, op. cit.*, p. 47.

9. Doja, A., *Bektashizmi në Shqipëri, op. cit.*, p. 93.

Prophet is seen as the vehicle by which the exoteric Qur'an became manifest to humanity." Even though Bektashi followers make no distinction between Muhammad and Ali we cannot presume that it is the same thing as the Christian concept of the Trinity. Abiva said that Hakk (Reality, i.e. God)-Muhammad-'Ali form a unified reality expressing a single truth (*Hakikat*). Outside the devotion of Imam Ali, inspirations for the doctrine of Bektashism are also the twelve Shiite Imams.

Tekkes are the places where Bektashism clerics stay and pray and these places are also frequented by non-clerics. Most Bektashi *tekkes* have *türbes* inside them, which are the graves of famous Babas and Dervishes. *Türbes* are recognised as powerhouses of spirituality, which is essential for Bektashi belief as well as for other Sufi orders.

Bektashism in Albania

The origin of Bektashism in Albania is controversial even today. A group of researchers think that the first presence of Bektashism in Albania dates to no earlier than the end of the 17th-century. This is related with the relatively late Islamisation of Albanians. Moreover, other scholars think that the Albanians were firstly presented with Islam precisely through the Bektashi and Alevi missionary follower time before Albania was invaded by Turkish soldiers.¹⁰ Another opinion is that Bektashi *tekkes* were built in Albania during the 15th-century but in reality the

Bektashi presence is a more recent phenomenon, existing since the early 19th-century. Many scholars were of the opinion that the spread of Bektashism in Albania during this period was given an impetus by the famous Ali Pasha of Janina (d. 1822). However, his connection with this order is under scrutiny, given that now contemporary documents have been discovered showing that he favoured the Halveti and the Sa'ditarikats over the Bektashis.¹¹

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Moreover, the strong relation between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps must also be noted. The Janissaries constituted the core of the Ottoman army, and its members, mainly from Christian backgrounds converted to Islam, were overwhelmingly Bektashis. Known as the Sons of Haji Bektash (*Haji Bektash Ogullari*), their uniforms, organisation and leadership were connected with the order.¹² A more direct motive of the spread of Bektashism is found in the decree issued by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826 CE that throughout the Empire abolished the Janissary Corps as well the Bektashi Order due to the close interconnection between the two.¹³

At that time, the reason for the prohibition of Bektashi by the Sultan was considered heresy but in reality it was a political

10. Ahmataj, S., *Bektashizmi nën smogun e një libri*, Botim, Urtësia, 1999, p. 82.

11. Abiva, H., *op.cit.*

12. Jazexhi, O., *The Bektashi Tarikah of Dervishes*, <http://www.reocities.com/djalosh/bektashi.pdf>.

13. Abiva, H., *op. cit.*

decision because both the Janissaries and the Bektashis were hotbeds of conservative opposition to the Sultan's reformist programmes. Despite the fact that a lot of Bektashi *tekkes* in Albania were demolished in compliance with this decree, several Babas from elsewhere in the Balkans found refuge in the sympathetic lands of the southern part of the country.¹⁴ This was one of the most difficult periods of Bektashism and another is the period when the Turkish state was headed by Kemal Atatürk, who placed unacceptable restrictions on the Bektashi and the Bektashi centre from Piri was settled in Albania.

We are presented with nationalism in the written works of Naim Frasheri, who was a poet and a prominent activist of the Albanian national movement in the 19th-century

In her book *Le bektachisme en Albanie*, Nathalie Clayer says the following about the establishment of the Bektashi Order in Albania: "In this way, Albanian's Bektashi in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire became a large group with influence in political areas, due to the incredibly powerful impact of their clergy on the people." This group was distanced, on the one hand, from the Turkish Bektashi and, on the other, from Sunni Muslims, due to the fact that they had conflicts over the independence of Albania and the approach that they offered to the union with the Turks. As a result, the Bektashi brotherhood, due to its potential and its identity, was now ready to emerge as an independent religious com-

munity in the new Albania."¹⁵ What Clayer claims is true because exactly in this period of the 19th-century the Bektashi community held a position against the Turks and closely related with the nationalist cause. *Tekkes* became centres of Albanian language teaching, which was often banned by Turks and by the dominance of the Greek Orthodox Church in some areas of southern Albania. These places of Bektashi worship played an exceptional role in the renaissance (*rilindja*) of Albanian nationalism.

We are presented with nationalism in the written works of Naim Frasheri, who was a poet and a prominent activist of the Albanian national movement in the 19th-century. He wrote *The Journal of the Bektashi*, which can be considered as the very first official document of the Albanian Bektashi Community. Naim Frasheri wrote a very well-known poem for Bektashism, *Qerbelaja* ("Kerbela"), published for the first time in 1898. This poem was a retelling of the story of Kerbela in which Imam Hossein, the son of Imam Ali and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was killed. This poem should be seen from two perspectives: firstly, as a poem describing a very tragic event and keeping alive its memory, which is of great importance for the Bektashi Community, and, secondly, as a political allegory. Naim Frasheri, in the wake of a long tradition of eastern literature and philosophy, tried to express and manifest his illuminist and humanist views. More than a retelling of a historical event, *Qerbelaja* is a moralistic and intellectual poem, a revelation of moral and humanist principles, a call for purity and perfection. In this way, mankind

14. Abiva, H., *op. cit.*

15. Clayer, N., *Le bektachisme en Albanie*, Tirana, albPaper, 2004, p. 296.

can enjoy life on earth and find the strength to overcome the worst events.”¹⁶

The last song of this poem is also notable as the author speaks only about the problems that Albania was facing during that period, such as education and language and the need for national unity and brotherhood between Albanians. The twenty-four songs of this epic poem “Kerbela” are written to lead the last song about Albanian issues and Albanians.¹⁷ The poetic style is similar to another heroic poem *The History of Scanderbeg* written by the same poet. The intertwining of nationalism with religion in Naim’s poetry was important for that time. Naim was Bektashi but above all he announced how important it was for the country at that time of suffering and wars to proclaim the slogan: “There is no nation without religion.”

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Naim tried to mobilise the Shiite orientation of the Bektashi and to announce his opposition to the Ottoman regime and to articulate a specific Muslim identity for Albanians. He thought that the Bektashi were heterodox and syncretistic so they would be able to overcome religious divisions in Albania and establish a bridge between differences of Islam and Christianity.¹⁸ Moreover, based on the definition often given for Bektashism as a pantheist doctrine,

Naim Frashëri in *Lulet e Vëres* (“Summer Flowers”) wrote that a true believer should not search for God in heaven or in Earth but should look elsewhere: *Kërkonin gjëtkë t’aj gjeje Zotn’ e madh e të vërtetë. Ay qenkej ndaj meje. E paskesha unë vetë!* (Seek elsewhere for God, The True One and The Great. He is near to me. He is in me!).

Bektashism in Albania, similar to other religions, underwent a series of persecutions before and after independence until 1990, with the democratisation of Albania.

Bektashism from Independence to the Communist Regime

Albania’s declaration of independence on the 28th November 1912 did not result in a considerable political stability but for Bektashism it brought about something important. The Bektashi leaders were given a place of honour in the 1914 National Assembly and they had an officially recognised representative in the highest office of the state.¹⁹ The Council of Regency in the newly independent state of Albania consisted of four members representing each of the country’s official religions: Sunni Muslims, Christian Orthodox, Catholic and Bektashi. But in this new era of Bektashism in Albania another scenario was building up against them in Turkey.

During the time of the Turkish Republic created by Kemal Atatürk the history of Bektashism witnessed a second great turn.

16. Doja, A., *op. cit.*, p. 65

17. Doja, A., *op. cit.*, p. 66

18. Lubonja, F., “Feja dhe Shqiptarët”, *Shekulli* newspaper, no. 291, 21st October, 2001, pp. 14-15.

19. Doja, A., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

With the banning of all the Sufi orders in 1925, the Bektashis were forced to abandon their *pir-evi* (Saint's Home) in Haji Bektash (between Kayseri and Kirsheir) and migrate to Albania.²⁰ In this period, the Albanian Bektashis began to make efforts to set up the Bektashi World Centre in Tirana. With the initiative of the grand-dede of the Order, Sali Niazi Dede, who was Albanian, the headquarters of the Bektashi located in the central *tekke* of Haxhibektash in Anatolia, in 1931 moved to Tirana, the capital of Albania. The second Congress of the Bektashi held on 8th July 1924 in the *tekke* of Gjirokastra, Albania gave its support to the aforementioned initiative. But before this, on 17th January 1921, the first Congress of Bektash was held in the *tekke* of Prishtë with the participation of many clerical and secular believers. In this Congress, the Bektashi Statute was formed, composed of 28 Articles. This Statute defined the Bektashi brotherhood according to the Bektashi Order.²¹ The other Statute of 63 Articles was approved at the 3rd Congress, on 26th September 1929. In this Congress, the Bektashi Community was declared an independent community.²²

After the Second World War and after the strengthening of the communist regime in Albania, the religious practitioners were seen as a potential threat to the ideology

In the 1930s, Bektashism in Albania entered in its golden age. New *tekkes* were established and smaller centres (*dervişhânes*)

were built mostly in the lands south of the Shkumbini River. A seminary was established in Tirana to methodologically train and educate dervishes and candidate Babas. Many *tekkes* possessed substantial properties (*vakıfs*) and these provided income for activities.²³ Bektashis, who were known as supporters of King Zog and the nationalist cause in the 1930s, during the Second World War were represented by a small group of fathers (*baballare*) such as Baba Faja of Martaneshi, who supported and fought against Fascism and Nazism for the liberation of Albania. After the Second World War and after the strengthening of the communist regime in Albania, the religious practitioners were seen as a potential threat to the ideology and in 1947 their activities were completely banned. Moreover, after the long years of the communist regime, Albania became the only atheist state in the world. The Bektashi believers and those who refused to bend to the communist mandates were executed or sent to hard labour camps and the regime did the same with other religious practitioners. In this period, all religious structures were closed and their activity was banned. Bektashi *tekkes* were no exception and they were either demolished or put to other uses. For example, the seat of the dedebaba in Tirana was converted into an old folklore centre. Other surviving *tekkes*, which frequently stood on mountains or hills, were transformed into army barracks or factories.²⁴

Despite the ban on religion by the state, Albanians preserved their religious rituals

20. Jazexhi, O., *op. cit.*

21. Ahmataj, S., *op. cit.*

22. Ahmataj, S., *op. cit.*

23. Abiva, H., *op. cit.*

24. Abiva, H., *op. cit.*

in secret. During this period, Albanians living abroad made a large contribution to the preservation of Bektashism. The Albanian Bektashi Community in diaspora gathered at the Kaygusuz Tekke in Cairo and selected its Baba, the revered Ahmed Sirri Dede (who was from southern Albania) to assume the rank of dedebaba in a move intended to counter the communist-approved dedebaba, Ahmet Myftar Dede. Regrettably, the pro-Soviet Egyptian revolution of 1952 closed the Kaygusuz *tekke* ending any effective counteraction to Enver Hoxha's stranglehold over Bektashism. Two years later in 1954, Baba Rexheb opened the first Albanian-American Bektashian *tekke* in Taylor, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Moreover, one of the *tekkes* in Kosova that was under the direction of Baba Kazim Bakalli (d.1983) and the American *tekke*, with its community of ardent believers, was one of the few remaining centres of the Bektashi Order in the world.²⁵

Religion in Albania after 1990

After the 1990s, the only atheist country in the world went through changes which also affected religious life. Step by step people reawakened their beliefs and rites kept secret for a long time. Bektashism was given its place in Albanian society and reminded believers of the values of love and tolerance. *Urtësia* (Wisdom) was one of the magazines published in this period by the Bektashi Community and there were other publications of religious communities which

reminded people of the freedom of belief and brought spiritual peace to them. Today, freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Albanian Constitution, issued in 1998. Article 10 guarantees that:

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- In the Republic of Albania there is no official religion.
- The state is neutral in questions of belief and conscience, and it also guarantees freedom of expression in public life.
- The state recognises the equality of religious communities.
- The state and the religious communities mutually respect the independence of one another and work together for the good of each of them and for all.
- Relations between the state and religious communities are regulated on the basis of agreements entered into between their representatives and the Council of Ministers. These agreements are ratified by the Assembly.
- Religious communities are juridical persons. They have independence in the administration of their properties according to their principles, rules and canons, to the extent that interests of third parties are not infringed.²⁶

25. Abiva, H., *op. cit.*

26. The Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Article 10.

Moreover, in the Eagles' Country the renewal of religious celebrations and holidays resulted in mutual harmony between different religious communities. Albanians mark every religious ceremony together. They go on pilgrimages to the church of Shen Ndout (Saint Ndou) in Laç of Albania to celebrate the memory of Christian saints or they go to Ballenja of Martanesh to celebrate the Bektashi saints. In these holy places affected by the beautiful and wonderful landscapes the people feel harmony in everything that surrounds them.

Every year Bektashi believers, Sunni Muslims and Christians gather in the mountain of Tomorri to celebrate and to pray for prosperity. Since ancient times this sacred mountain in the south of Albania was called The Throne of Gods and was considered by Albanian writers and foreign writers as the Olympus of Albania or Dodona, the sanctuary of divine Gods.

Referring to the tradition, Haji Bektashi himself was interested in Tomorri Mountain when he saw the pilgrims that went to pray to a pagan God every summer. He took a

handful of earth from Abaz Ail's tomb in Kerbela and put it in Tomorri. Since that time, according to folklore, Tomorri was considered the second tomb of Abaz Ali, saint of the Bektashi Order. Naim Frasheri expressed this symbol of Albanian faith in verse: *Abas Aliu zu Tomor, erdhi afër nesh, Shqipëria s'mbet e gjojë, se Zoti e desh* ("Abaz Ali held Tomorri, came close to us, Albania didn't remain poor, God blessed us").

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