

Between Tradition and a New Identity: Crypto-Catholicism in Post-war Kosovo

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Submitted to
Central European University
History Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Vienna, Austria

2022

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the willingness of my interviewees to share their stories with me. Thereby, I devote this work to them. Nor without the support of my sister and my mother, who kept being a moral support for me in the many difficulties I encountered while writing this thesis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and unjustified issues with my residence permit in Austria, which restricted me to travel for 7 months and inability to conduct this research on time. I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Mate Tokic, for their professional help and support they offered throughout the process of writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Andrea Peto, whose class and work were an inspiration for this thesis and motivated me in the writing process. I am thankful also to the whole CEU community for being a family in such difficult times. It is a pleasure to have such supportive and kind people around you!

Abstract

In this thesis, I study the phenomenon of practicing a dual religion in Kosovo in forms of crypto-Catholicism. I try to observe how this phenomenon evolved through the centuries and the different phases that it went through, from Ottoman Empire to the two Yugoslav states and finally in independent Kosovo. Crypto-Catholics, or known as *laramans* in Albanians language, are Albanians of Roman Catholic faith who converted to Islam during the Ottoman era, but in the privacies of their comfort spaces kept their Catholic identity and continued to practice the Catholic faith, usually in secret. Crypto-Catholicism did not end at any stage of the Kosovan history, but it continued to exist. It has remained present even in the post-Yugoslav space of Kosovo and it has affected the religious identity of this European country.

My oral history research was conducted in different parts of Kosovo in 2021 and 2022, and it is based on ten interviews. Nine of the interviews I conducted with people of crypto-Catholic heritage and one of them with a Catholic priest from Kosovo. These oral testimonies offer an interesting glimpse into the ways crypto-Catholicism has manifested itself in the post-Yugoslav space and what are the differences between this practice in post-war Kosovo, as compared to other periods when this phenomenon was prevalent in Kosovo. The oral testimonies I managed to collect have obviously challenged some of the existing scholarship on this practice.

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Introduction

After the Kosovo war in 1998/9 Crypto-Catholicism came out of the surfaces of the complexity of religious identities in Kosovo. Suddenly, some crypto-Catholics spoke out publicly, conversions started taking place and their identity and ways of life were discussed by the public opinion. The origins of this thesis lies exactly on this big interest for the crypto-Catholic community of Kosovo immediately after the last war there and in the following years. Having different scholars, media, organizations and institutions trying to trace the origin of the crypto-Catholic community and their experiences, there has been almost no interest in looking at the big change that influenced this community after the Kosovo war, and namely after the independence of Kosovo. This thesis seeks to locate the change that occurred among the crypto-Catholic community of Kosovo after the Kosovo war, namely with the democratic system and their partial openness to out or accept their heritage and how did this dual religious practice influenced the identity politics in the Kosovan post-conflict society. At the other side, another part of this community has preferred to remain silent about their identity even in democracy, thereby this thesis will also try to look at the reasons why part of them have still remained silenced about their religious heritage. The survival of such a 'secretive' phenomenon among centuries and its presence in the contemporary times will also be a main focus of this thesis.

The temporal scope of this thesis will focus on contemporary Kosovo, namely the post-conflict Kosovo after 1999 until present-days. Thereby, the thesis will follow the change that occurred in the time-scope from pre-1999 Yugoslav rule in Kosovo to post-Yugoslav time and independence. But, also the thesis will discuss the origins of crypto-Catholicism and its practices during Ottoman era in order to understand better this phenomenon.

As for the geographical boundaries my thesis will be focused on modern-day Kosovo, meaning the administrative borders of the modern-day country of Kosovo, as defined after the declaration of the independence of Kosovo in 2008, but also the same borders as defined as autonomous province of Kosovo during socialist Yugoslav rule from 1945.¹ Even though the term Kosovo or Kosovan in the cultural sense may be of wider usage and include also other communities outside the current borders of Kosovo, especially the territories of 19th and early 20th century Kosovo Vilayet under Ottoman administration², this thesis will include only the modern-day Kosovo. The crypto-Catholic community may be found also among these “cultural Kosovans”, especially in the North-east of modern-day North Macedonia, or in Southern parts of modern-day Serbia, as well as in certain regions of Montenegro, but the main target group of this thesis is the crypto-Catholic community in Kosovo. This thesis is aiming to explore the question of crypto-Catholicism in the new Kosovar post-conflict democracy, namely to see how did the post-Yugoslav rule influence this community and their religious practice in order to become more visible for the world.

Crypto-Catholicism, or as known in Albanian language also as “laramanizëm” (meaning: colorful, variegated, varicolored, etc.), occurred among Gheg Albanian community of the Roman Catholic faith as they converted to Islam in different periods of the Ottoman period (mostly 18th century), but kept practicing their previous faith in a hidden way³. As the reasons for their conversion were mostly economically or politically motivated, and to some extent forced conversions should also be taken into account, their approach towards the new religious identity that they were adopting

¹ Nathalie Clayer. *Kosova: The Building Process of Territory from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Jerusalem: The European Forum at the Hebrew University, 2013, 79-92), 82.

² Ibid., 82-83.

³ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mitteralter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 50.

was not approached in a spiritual or religious way.⁴ People from this community identified themselves in public as Muslim, meanwhile in the privacies of their own spaces (family, village, church) they identified as Catholic and practiced rituals that are associated with the Roman Catholic faith.

Such a practice remained among many people even after the Ottoman Empire, in the Kosovo case meaning under Yugoslav rule and continued its legacy even in the post-Yugoslav Kosovan space, namely the 21st century. Their public identity remained as Muslim, but their religious and spiritual activities or even their own perception of themselves continued resembling Catholicism. There was not much interest or attention to the crypto-Catholic community of Kosovo during the Yugoslav rule in Kosovo, so most of the attention to this community came after the Kosovo war, in the process of building the Kosovan state. In democracy, crypto-Catholics became partially more open to the public about their experiences and practices, reachable to the media, they started approaching the Catholic Church more openly, but also vice-versa, the Roman Catholic Church started approaching them and more openly calling on them for official conversion to their previous faith. Some of them did public conversions, famous personalities started coming out about their crypto-Catholic traditions and official policies started acknowledging their existence.⁵

As the state policies of Kosovo remained highly secular, same as the cultural mentality of the Kosovo Albanians, Crypto-Catholics as part of the Kosovar society were not excluded from the secularity process and culture. In that sense, their more open embrace of their Catholic past is less spiritual and religious, but more as a cultural and even a political act. The state of Kosovo, as the

⁴ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62.

⁵ Fatos Bytyci. *Out of hiding, some Kosovars embrace Christianity* (Reuters, September 28, 2008).

youngest European country, has started its state building much later compared to the other European countries. As the attention of pre-war Kosovo under Yugoslav rule was almost always focused on the inter-ethnic relations of the communities living there⁶, the economical conditions and the struggle for independence from Yugoslavia, the topic of crypto-Catholicism was marginalized and not enough attention was brought to it, even by the crypto-Catholic community itself. But, immediately after the Kosovo war and in the state-building process topics regarding crypto-Catholic community have been moving slowly from the margins towards being more transparent and visible. The highly Western influenced post-war Kosovan society allowed to this community to finally come to terms with its own past and see another interpretation of the past, and not only this, but the Catholic past seems to have affected also the non-crypto-Catholic community of Kosovo in terms of coming to terms with a different interpretation about their identity through the generations.

Nevertheless, not all crypto-Catholics of Kosovo have come out as such or have approached the Catholic Church for conversion. Actually, most of them continue living this dual identity even in the post-war Kosovan society, among other reasons also due to the secularization and the fact that many of them, especially the younger generations, perceive this identity as more cultural rather than spiritual. Thereby, the meaning of this identity has changed through the different conditions among the years. Researching on how this practice has evolved through the years and how it came out in the surface at times of a secular culture and mentality is something very important to be addressed as, as the “long forgotten past” comes back and influences the current society.

⁶ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000),155.

The study of this phenomenon would help to understand better not only the history of Kosovo and its communities and identities, but also it may be of a great help for the study of such hidden religious communities in different parts of the world and their evolution or perishing. Very close parallels could be drawn between the phenomenon of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo with the crypto-Christian community of Pontic Greeks during Ottoman Empire⁷, the crypto-Armenians in Modern Turkey⁸, or the Dönme (a crypto-Jewish community in modern-day Turkey and Greece)⁹. This study may also motivate for a further research on these communities in the contemporary time.

Much of what is known about crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo comes from different international and local scholars of history, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, etc. Despite the methodological diversity of the conducted researches, as well as the diversity of time-scopes or events regarding the Crypto-Catholics of Kosovo, almost no research is conducted on the survival of crypto-Catholicism in contemporary Kosovo. Most of the researches focus on the 19th century, especially on the expulsions from Karadak area in South-Eastern Kosovo by Ottoman authorities, after few villages came out as Catholics, or in the Roman Catholic world known as “Martyrs of Stublla”.

For example Gerlachus Duijzings in their book “*Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo*” dedicates a whole chapter to the crypto-Catholic community, where they mostly focus on the 19th and 20th century in the South-Eastern Kosovo trying to observe the expulsion from Karadak and

⁷ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review , Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 230.

⁸ Ayşe Gül Altınay, Fethiye Çetin. *The Grandchildren: The Hidden Legacy of 'Lost' Armenians in Turkey*. (Transaction Publishers, 2014)

⁹ Marc D. Baer. *The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism* (Comparative Studies in Society and History 46-6, 2004), 682-702.

the conditions of the Catholic community in this area of Kosovo¹⁰. Other researches tend to focus more on the conversion process itself, namely the conversion to Islam and the ways crypto-Catholics managed to maintain their previous faith and how this affected their lives and the societies where they were living¹¹. Noel Malcolm, as the author of the book “*Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians*” does an excellent job of summarizing the phenomenon of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo, the ways it occurred and how it manifested itself, how it was very individual and different not only from one place to another but also it occurred differently in different families, as well as giving examples of meaningful events for this phenomenon¹². Most of the focus seems to go to late Ottoman Empire, and little bit to Kosovo under the rule of Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Anyway, no attention of the scholars is given to crypto-Catholicism during the socialist era, and even less to this phenomenon post-1999, meaning after the Kosovo war.

This thesis intends to go further with the time-scope and look at the contemporary period, this way offering a new perspective of historical change in the target issue. Namely, it may also be as a continuation of where most of the other authors stopped in sense of the time-scope. Most of the researchers who have worked on the issue, have tried to deal with “big events” for the target community, the relations and approaches of the Others towards this community (especially the Catholic Church, the political elites who ruled in the territories of Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox

¹⁰ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000).

¹¹ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995).

¹² Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Church, etc) and have dealt only with church sources and official administrative documents. So, namely they have been doing a top-down history.

In order to understand this phenomenon better it is necessary to understand and study the community itself better, as it is a very specific community, which is not only marginalized, but also very secretive and skeptical on how their perception of their practice is interpreted. To achieve this I will be using a methodology of oral history, thereby this is a novelty in studies of crypto-Catholics in Kosovo. Conducting oral interviews with people who come from such a background is much more helpful in understanding their nature of existence and how do they perceive their identity in terms of the changes that occur. Oral history has been a means of empowering the weak, the disenfranchised and the victim, and as such it provides a good tool when working with communities that have never or rarely been featured in the mainstream histories.¹³ Having in mind the ‘silence’ and the subversive nature of the phenomenon that this thesis is trying to research, I believe that a study based on case studies from new primary sources, that I have provided for the first time for the needs of this thesis, will be a fruitful exercise that will shed more light on this phenomenon that has been avoided to be researched from the bottom-up. Thereby, I will bring not only a new time-scope for researching this topic, but also a new methodology.

By analyzing how did the post-war state-building of Kosovo and the identity policies framed and reshaped the crypto-Catholic identity in the Kosovar society, I will strive to show in this thesis, the interplay of different levels of how this process of building democracy and a new state corresponded with this secretive, religious/spiritual and traditional identity. Namely, I will be trying to look on how did the new Kosovan state affect the crypto-Catholic community.

¹³ Lynn Abrams. *Oral History Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 154.

Additionally, it is necessary to draw on concepts and theories provided by different scholars, such as historians, anthropologists and sociologists.

To understand the phenomenon and identity of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo is necessary to look at the previous works done by the scholars, in order to be able to follow the changes that emerged inside this community – not only among its own members how they interpreted their own identity, but also of the Kosovan society on how it came to terms with this identity. As explained above, most of the authors when analyzing the crypto-Catholic phenomenon in Kosovo focus on 18th, 19th or early 20th century, thereby their concepts and theories used to examine this issue will be treated again and researched if they can be applicable to the crypto-Catholic community in the Kosovan post-war era.

According to Gerlachus Duijzings he argues on how did the crypto-Catholics before 19th century practice this tradition in South-eastern Kosovo, as there were not many Catholic churches around in the time.¹⁴ Through the oral accounts I have as primary sources, I will try to see how this is practiced nowadays, even on places without easy access to Roman Catholic churches in current places in Kosovo. In order to examine better the place of crypto-Catholicism in post-war Kosovo, I will have to look through different theories of the process of identity building, as well as state-building in Kosovo. Namely, the changes that would occur immediately after the war in terms of identity policies, should be a central point of the theoretical framework in order to achieve a better result of the analysis.

¹⁴ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000),84.

As of the oral history interviews used as a corpus of primary sources in this thesis, the practice (the oral interviews) and the theory (the analysis) are entwined. The oral history interviews elicit information about the past, but they represent also communicative events which demand that I try to understand not just what is said but how and why it is said, and what it means. The application of theory helps me to undertake this analysis. Thereby, the oral interviews would be analyzed through the theories of oral history on how to interpret and analyze such sources. Through the oral history interviews, I will determine whether the claims of some media that the crypto-Catholics have started more openly to embrace their past and their identity in democracy correspond with the material I will work on.¹⁵ Also, through the oral materials I will also try to determine whether is still the fear of stigma as the main factor of many crypto-Catholics to remain secretive as claimed by officials of the Roman Catholic of Kosovo, or there are more layers to this secrecy in the contemporary times.¹⁶

As a corpus of primary sources for the needs of this thesis, I will be using ten oral interviews I conducted with nine people with a crypto-Catholic background and one Catholic priest from Kosovo. In relation to crypto-Catholicism, the personal testimonies of people with such identity background may offer unique glimpses into the interior of the crypto-communities and reveal a complex wave of influences and factors, which contributed in reshaping this practice and the processes of state building, transitional democracy and the relations with the Others. Life stories are very valuable sources of knowledge as they provide information about the climate and moral parameters of a certain group that are not to be found in written sources other than personal letters

¹⁵ Fatos Bytyci. *Out of hiding, some Kosovars embrace Christianity* (Reuters, September 28, 2008).

¹⁶ Anna Di Lellio. *Kosovan and Catholic* (The Guardian, May 21, 2008).

or diaries¹⁷ (which is not the case there, as taking into account the high rate of illiteracy in Kosovo before 1945).

Apart from the oral sources, I will also take into account few media articles and reportages about the crypto-Catholic community in Kosovo, which come both from local and international sources. Through this, it can be made a much clearer picture on how the Others perceive and represent the crypto-Catholics in contemporary Kosovo.

In the first chapter I will provide an introduction to oral history and give a context of why oral history is necessary to work on such a topic. It will explain about my own oral history research, the methods and ways of interviewing I used, how did I locate the community and the ways I approached it. It will explain the settings of the interviews during a pandemic crisis, as well as my role as a researcher. The second chapter will address the history of the crypto-Catholic community in Kosovo. I will try to look through the different researches and the available data, as well as how different historians approached and researched this community. This chapter is supposed to give context to what crypto-Catholicism represents, how it manifests itself and its variation from one place to another, from one community to another, as well as its transformation through various times. It will examine the relations of the crypto-Catholics with other communities, with the Roman Catholic Church and the dynamics of this practice when it comes to the religious/spiritual aspect. The third chapter will evaluate the oral history interviews and bring light to crypto-Catholicism during the formation of the Kosovan state. In this final chapter, I will look through the change that occurred with crypto-Catholicism being discussed more openly by the media, academia and the society itself. Giving context to the interviews, I will evaluate how

¹⁷ Daniel Bertraux. *Life Stories: An Ethnosociological Perspective* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1997), 27.

did this change affect the community and how did the idea of crypto-Catholicism reflected in a post-Yugoslav Kosovan space. This chapter will also analyze the conversions of some of the crypto-Catholics to Catholicism that happened in this period, the building of new Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals around Kosovo, as well as the case of the first Kosovan President Ibrahim Rugova and speculations about his biography of being a crypto-Catholic.

In the above examinations, this study will combine cultural, social and political history, examining the dynamics of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo and its manifestation among the local population, as well as the crypto-Catholic identity's place in a Western-influenced post-war Kosovan society and politics. This study will utilize the culturalist approach of doing a bottom-up contemporary history of the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo, as something necessary in order to fill the gaps in the histories of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo. It will summarize that the phenomenon of crypto-Catholicism not only that did not vanish in modern Kosovo, but it has progressed in terms of modern-day identities and other layers and meanings were added on it, meanwhile some previous meanings of this identity have faded away with time due to reasons argued in the thesis.

The study will detect some of the reasons behind the silence of crypto-Catholics. The analysis, asides from hopefully taking a step toward a more complete understanding of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo, will provide a case study into the means through which the post-war Kosovan identities have been built and how they have evolved. Hopefully, this study will open space for and motivate further research on Albanian crypto-Catholic community in North Macedonia or elsewhere in the Balkans or similar secretive communities and their evolution in contemporary times elsewhere around the world.

Chapter I: Oral history and crypto-Catholicism

In the last few decades, oral history has made a big contribution to the studies of communities that were marginalized or not studied enough. Portelli states oral history gives information about people who are illiterate or social groups whose written history is missing or distorted.¹⁸ Another aspect they state is that oral sources give information about the daily lives and material culture of these people.¹⁹ In contemporary times, this is not the main aim of oral history as, for example, similar material can be found in written sources, such as letters of members of such community, or many oral history projects are conducted with people who use writing and are aware of writing archival material about the topics they are discussing.

When working with such a secretive community, as the crypto-Catholic community in Kosovo, oral history can provide the best methodological tool, as there can hardly be found personal written sources of these people regarding their religious or spiritual feelings, and their history has been excluded from the mainstream aspects of the contemporary history of Kosovo. The historians and other scholars working on the histories of the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo tend to focus more on the 19th century or early 20th century, and it all ends there. One gets the feeling their history ends there and their traditions or identity cease to exist as such at that time. However, after the Kosovo war in 1999, a flux of crypto-Catholics coming out as such or being for a nuance more open to discussing their religious identity or origin proves this community never ceased existing as such, despite the silence regarding them. Hence, oral history remains the only available tool for conducting research about this community.

¹⁸ Alessandro Portelli. *The Oral History Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 64.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In relation to crypto-Catholics, oral history may offer a glimpse through the past, as oral history is more about meaning than events.²⁰ As the crypto-Catholics in Kosovo are not a monolithic group of people, neither are they a structured organization, but it is about common people from various regions of Kosovo, different social classes, different interests, different political opinions, from all genders and sexualities, and the only thing they have in common is that they were born in Muslim Albanian families but practice or identify more with Roman Catholicism in terms of spirituality or sometimes cultural identification. So, their crypto-Catholicism is not on the same level of identification or practice. Thereby, they all have different personal stories.

Even though all sources, both written and oral, represent subjective sources, meaning they are produced from a particular standpoint and identity,²¹ according to Abrams, the oral sources are not only looking for facts but also are detecting emotional responses, political views, and the very subjectivity of human existence.²² To paraphrase Portelli, oral sources do not only tell us what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they think they are doing now.²³

When dealing with such a community, which still tends to remain more secretive and ‘underground’ and, at the same time, is not even organized among itself and is not homogenous, the need for the subjectivity that oral history can provide is necessary. So, when dealing with such memories and having many layers of the past, it is important to emphasize that memory in such cases is not a passive depository of the past but an active process of creation of meanings.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹ Lynn Abrams. *The Peculiarities of Oral History* (Oral History Theory, Routledge, 2010), 22.

²² Ibid.

²³ Alessandro Portelli. *The Oral History Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 50.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

Both popular and scholarly historical works have embraced oral history as a very decent methodology to expose ignored or marginalized topics and present diversified perspectives of the past.²⁵ The intentions of oral history are also to bring voice to the voiceless in history, and that is only one reason I approached oral history and interviewing. Oral history has been a means of empowering the weak, the disenfranchised and the victim, and as such, it provides a space for those who never or rarely are featured in mainstream histories.²⁶ As Kosovo Albanians, due to the political and social conditions in Yugoslavia, were highly illiterate just before one generation and the majority of them did not produce any kind of sources for themselves, doing oral history is the best methodology to approach this community. Especially since we are dealing with a non-mainstream and secretive community among the Kosovo Albanians, oral history provides the best way not only to research crypto-Catholics in Kosovo, which seem to have been ignored and excluded from the main contemporary historiographies of Kosovo, but also to empower the community and allow them to speak about themselves and create their own narrative.

As Abrams argues, in the third wave of oral history, we should talk more about advocacy than empowerment. What they mean by this is that, instead of giving voice to the disadvantaged and marginalized, we should use their voices to advocate for them and bring their stories to the front.²⁷ So, the usage of oral history has changed with time, from giving voice to the voiceless to subjects empowering themselves in terms of context. As oral history had a great usage for various categories of disadvantaged and silenced communities in certain times and certain socio-political conditions, such as blacks in USA, women, feminists, queer people, survivors of the Holocaust,

²⁵ Joan Sangster. *Telling our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History*. (in Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (eds). *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998), 87.

²⁶ Lynn Abrams. *Oral History Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 154.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

etc.²⁸, the usage of oral history with the crypto-Catholic community in Kosovo is very valid. Even though the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo have not been directly persecuted in Kosovo's post-war democracy, we can see the absence of their mention from the Kosovan history and their silence from the Kosovan society. Hence, this community is left on the margins of Kosovan society, and their 'in between' practice is often dominated by the religious community.

The life stories of the crypto-Catholics from Kosovo are a valuable source of knowledge because they provide what Betraux names as information on sociometry, cultural climate, and the moral of the communities, and this kind of knowledge is not to be found in written sources, except written personal letters.²⁹ In this case, there are very small possibilities that personal letters or diaries of these people discussing their religious practices or identity could be found.

Religious identity usually links a person to certain beliefs or affiliations. But in a modern secularized world, as it is the case with Kosovo, religious identity no longer takes the lead in constructing a person's life. It takes its place among other layers of identity, such as age, class, (dis)ability, language, race, sexuality, gender, indigeneity, locality, and size.³⁰ The religious identity constructed in Kosovo, including the identity of the crypto-Catholics, is constructed by social discourses as all other mentioned parts of the identity. Oral history in this regard affirms and acknowledges the constructed identity of the people.

Building on these insights from oral history practice and methodology, I constructed a framework to approach my oral sources. In the following section, I will describe the data I collected, the

²⁸ Ibid., 158.

²⁹ Daniel Bertraux. *Life Stories: An Ethnosociological Perspective* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1997), 27.

³⁰ Peter Hopkins. *Young People, Place and Identity*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 8.

methodology I used for approaching and gathering these data, and the challenges I faced in my oral history research in Kosovo.

1.1 Explaining the fieldwork

I conducted my oral history research in Kosovo from June 2021 until April 2022. I conducted the interviews in different parts of Kosovo, as my interviewees came from different areas. I mostly travelled to the bigger cities and towns, as even when the interviewees were from a smaller village, they preferred meeting in a larger place due to keeping their identity safer, as meeting with a stranger at a smaller place in Kosovo may attract the attention of the other inhabitants. Thereby, I had to travel to Prishtina, Ferizaj, Prizren, Gjilan, and Viti. All participants in my project came from these cities or places nearby, except one from Drenica region in central Kosovo, but preferred to meet in the capital Prishtina. Others had different regional origins but had moved to the places that we met.

My research draws on oral testimonies of crypto-Catholics of Kosovo. What the participants of my research had in common was their identification with Roman Catholicism in any terms, spiritual or cultural. They were all born into Muslim Kosovo Albanian families, the men were circumcised due to the traditions of Islam, some of them or their ancestors even attended mosques and Muslim prayers, they celebrated Eid, and part of them even had names or surnames that indicate a Muslim name (especially people of older generations, as the younger generations tended to have more names with meanings in Albanian language or Latinized names.). But, many of them preserved the rudiments of Christian faith; they would say Roman Catholic prayers; some of them even attended church and observed Christian feasts and fasts (some of them claimed their family members fast on Fridays) and performed other Roman Catholic rituals. The biggest part of them

said they do not practice these rituals due to spirituality but mostly due to tradition and culture. So, what they all had in common was this dual form of religious life or identification.

I would refer further in my research to the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo as a community. That does not imply they have the sense of belonging to a certain group or they are organized in a collective form of living. Actually, a part of them did not even know about the presence of other people with the same dual practice of religion in other parts of Kosovo. They also did not have a common purpose. Noel Malcolm says the term community in such cases emphasizes a phenomenon of social religious life, as individuals may have hidden their faith at all sorts of times and places, but the sort of crypto-Christianity in the case of Kosovo's crypto-Catholics is a form of life, a tradition, something that can be sustained and transmitted only by a community.³¹ Thereby, the common tradition these people inherited from the older generations of their families make them a distinctive community, even though they are not organized at any social or political level in Kosovo.

The term 'crypto-Catholic' or 'laraman'³² will be used as an umbrella term to refer to these people. When taking into consideration the diversity that my interviewees represent through the various geographical lines of Kosovo, regional identities, political beliefs, social class, and levels of religiosity – the term crypto-Catholic or laraman is the layer they all have in common.

As explained above, my research will focus only on Kosovo, and by this, I mean the territory of the Republic of Kosovo, as defined by the Constitution of Republic of Kosovo. The term Kosovan or Kosovar, when used, will refer only to the people that live inside the mentioned borders of Kosovo. As I decided to do a reflection on crypto-Catholicism in post-war Kosovo society, this

³¹ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 55.

³² In Albanian literal meaning: colorful, variegated, motley, two-faced, also as a common term to describe the crypto-Catholics in the Albanian world.

research will not include crypto-Catholics outside the Republic of Kosovo. The need to mention this comes out of the fact that Kosovo, as it exists today, did not exist before 1945-1946, as with these administrative borders it was defined during communist Yugoslavia.³³ The term ‘Kosova’ in the Albanian world before 1945 was used to define a territory much bigger than the administrative units of 1945. Namely, it was much closer to what the Villayet of Kosova in the Ottoman Empire represented.³⁴ Even nowadays, there is some ambivalence when using the term Kosova or the adjective Kosovar/n, as culturally some people may refer to it, and to places that were not included in the administrative unit of Kosovo in 1945, for example Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo and other places included in the administrative units of Macedonia or Preshevo Valley, which was included in the administrative unit of Serbia.³⁵ Thereby, many people from former parts of the Ottoman Villayet of Kosova refer to themselves as culturally Kosovar Albanians, meaning parts of Albanians from North Macedonia, Serbia or Montenegro, but the administrative unit of 1945 contributed to the modern-day borders of Republic of Kosovo.³⁶

Furthermore, during socialist Yugoslavia and the new administrative borders, the term “Kosovar” would be used not only by Albanians in Yugoslavia but also by others to emphasize all Albanians of Yugoslavia, regardless if they are from the former Yugoslav province of Kosovo or from other parts of socialist Yugoslavia, such as Macedonia, Serbia, or Montenegro.³⁷ Thereby, I am aware that the common culture and traditions among these ‘cultural Kosovar Albanians’ are tied to each other. Traces of crypto-Catholicism in the past and present can be found to a large extent in the

³³ Nathalie Clayer. *Kosova: The Building Process of Territory from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Jerusalem: The European Forum at the Hebrew University, 2013, 79-92), 82.

³⁴ Ibid., 82-83.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 81.

³⁷ Lendrit I. Mehmeti. *Kosovar Identity: Challenging Albanian National Identity* (Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies, vol.9 (1), pp.16-25, 2017), 19.

Kumanovo, Skopje, or Preshevo area, but also in other Albanian-inhabited parts of former Yugoslavia³⁸. But, as my research will focus on post-war Kosovo, I believe many processes in socialist Yugoslavia and the war itself in Kosovo, including post-war independence, have shaped the administrative unit of Kosovo differently in a political and cultural sense. By this, all policies and everyday life have been affected, including the practice of crypto-Catholicism.

All my interviewees, except practicing forms of crypto-Catholicism, were born in the territories of what we defined above as Republic of Kosovo. As such, they went through the social, political, and cultural processes that directly affected the citizens of Kosovo. Thereby, their lives and identities have been influenced by the changes that have occurred in Kosovo, unlike crypto-Catholics that are not from present-day Kosovo.

1.2 Explaining the interviews

As my interests in the interviews lay mostly in their qualitative nature, instead of their quantitative nature, I decided to use unstructured interviews, mainly in-depth interviews with open-ended questions. Unlike structured interviews that require a very formal approach and more of a sociological set of questions offered to all of the interviewees, the unstructured interviews I used were a building of human to human relation between me and my respondents, which also helped to prove the desire to understand, rather than to explain.³⁹ Namely, the goal of my interviews was to understand and not to explain to my interviewees what happened and how they were supposed to feel or do. Because of this, I avoided interrupting them when they were talking in the interviews, even when they started to talk about topics unrelated to the topic or to what I asked initially. This

³⁸ Albert Ramaj. *Stublla im Kosovo : die Geschichte, die Schule und das Krypto-Christentum der Karadakregion* (St. Gallen : Albanisches Institut, 2008), 167-174.

³⁹ Andre Fontana, James H. Frey. *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. (London: Sage, 2003), 57.

was my way of trying to understand the complex behavior of members of a society, without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry.⁴⁰ One common way to reach this is to immerse yourself in the native culture by interacting with the natives and simply being there, as someone who is willing to understand.⁴¹

I conducted ten interviews, nine of them with people who were crypto-Catholics in any sense and one of them with a Roman Catholic priest from Kosovo who has studied this community and has worked with them in various ways. Four of my interviewees identified as women and six of them, including the priest, as men. They were from various generations, aged from 29 to 68. As explained above, they were from different places around Kosovo and had a diverse range of interests, professions, educational background, and political views.

I intended to avoid getting short and clear-cut answers. Therefore, I prepared a questionnaire. However, as the backgrounds of my interviewees were very different, I had to reshape some questions of the questionnaire before every interview. It was not always easy to follow the questionnaire, as in such interviews you get information in the answers that lead to another story important for the research, so you must follow the narration of the interviewee and try to interact with them. Jarzabek argues that the function of the questions in oral history research should not only be of an informative nature, but also of an interactive nature.⁴² According to them, the questions should not be only about discovering from the interviewee what happened, how they felt about it, how they recall it, and what the wider public memory draws on it, but also about keeping

⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Marcin Jarzabek. *It is good to ask good questions – posing questions in oral history interview as a theoretical problem* (Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej, 6, 2016, pp. 21–32), 24.

the communication act (meaning the dialogue, interaction), building trust between the interviewer and interviewee, and accelerating the process of recalling memoirs of the narrator.⁴³

My questionnaire starts with basic biographical questions related to the cultural, regional, and religious background of my interviewees. Naturally, most of the questions were related to the religious heritage of my interviewees, their perception of it, their ways of identification, the religious practices and traditions, as well as their inheritance and origin. I also asked questions about their lives in Yugoslavia before the Kosovo war and after the war in independent Kosovo, the changes, and how it affected their religious practice. I asked questions about their relations to both of the religions, namely Islam and Roman Catholicism, as well as questions about official conversion to Roman Catholicism. My questionnaire with the Roman Catholic priest was a different questionnaire that included mostly questions about their perception, but also the perception of the Roman Catholic Church of Kosovo regarding crypto-Catholics. It included questions of religious service to this community, their frequency in the church, and official conversions.

Nevertheless, not all the questions were used at all interviews. As suggested by Donald Ritchie, it is always safer to have prepared more questions in advance in case some of the interviewees respond too briefly and need follow-up questions.⁴⁴ I had prepared questions ‘just in case’ that would be the issue. Also, some of the interviewees talked at great length to a single question, and within a single question, they would answer other questions they had not heard yet. I never asked more than a single question at once or a multi-layered question, as that may have brought the risks

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History: Practical Advice and Reasonable Explanation for Anyone* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 59.

of the interviewees addressing only one of the questions or only a certain layer of the question, and it could have resulted in having to repeat the other unanswered part or simply forgetting it through the narrative.⁴⁵

Strategies used to question in oral history research include particular recollection of certain events, memories or ‘pictures’, data, or opinion.⁴⁶ In my interviews with crypto-Catholics, I used a strategy of all three methods. Collecting data, according to Jarzabek, includes questions about parents, ancestors, jobs, etc., meaning the data we gather in our memories throughout life and not a direct recollection of the past.⁴⁷

As my interviews were in-depth open-ended interviews, they required more of a natural talk between two people. Thereby, there was space for exchange of questions and answers, with a place for silence when it was necessary. In certain cases, I asked information I already knew, or I even paraphrased what the interviewees said before, as it served as a good method to give self-confidence to the interviewees to continue their talking, and it helped to build a relationship between the interviewees and me.⁴⁸

While doing oral history research, linguistic issues may show up, regardless if both of the parties are fluent in the spoken language. Sometimes jargon may be used, and especially in cross-cultural settings, this may represent a difficult issue for the parties to understand each other fully.⁴⁹ Talking cross-culturally, especially in a language that is not native to one of the parties, may affect the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁶ Marcin Jarzabek. *It is good to ask good questions – posing questions in oral history interview as a theoretical problem* (Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej, 6, 2016, pp. 21–32), 26–27.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Andre Fontana, James H. Frey. *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. (London: Sage, 2003), 58.

interview as certain things would lose their original meaning.⁵⁰ Many oral history researchers rely on an interpreter, but this adds an additional meaning to the interview and its interpretation.⁵¹ In the case of my study, this was not an issue, as I spoke the Albanian language on a native level, the same as my interviewees. Thereby, I suggested the interviews be conducted in the Kosovar Gheg Albanian language, even when one of the interviewees offered to do the interview in English, as they were fluent in English as well. I also considered the standard Albanian language in the beginning. But, as that is a language form taken from another dialect of the Albanian language, namely the Tosk dialect, in my opinion, that would have affected the interviews in many ways. The standard Albanian language in Kosovo is used only in formal settings, and that was not my goal while conducting the interviews. I aimed at creating a more flexible and natural talk with my interviewees and giving them the sense of a non-formal talk. If they used the standard Albanian language that emerged from the Tosk dialect, my Gheg speakers would have had to look for other convenient words to describe what they aimed to say, and that may have affected the real meaning of their sentences. Especially when talking about Roman-Catholic words in Albanian language, many of those terms are used only in Gheg Albanian dialect, as the Christian Tosk Albanians in majority belong to the Orthodox Church. By using the Gheg dialect of Albanian language, I avoided linguistic or cross-cultural misunderstanding and created a more open and trustworthy atmosphere during the interviews.

Studies suggest it is very helpful to locate an insider as a cultural guide or informant when conducting oral history research.⁵² The informant's role may be not only translating cultural and linguistic codes for the interviewer when necessary, but also helping locate other members of a

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 59.

certain community.⁵³ This is why my first interview for this project was conducted with the Catholic priest Don Shan Zefi, and among other things, he was a great source of help in locating members of this community and interviewing them. Don Shan Zefi, as a priest who has daily contact with a lot of crypto-Catholics in Kosovo and in North Macedonia, helped me to locate many other potential interviewees as he already had a relationship with them, and they trusted him. He provided me with various other information, such as names of villages and regions where crypto-Catholics are very common nowadays, as well as histories of the conversions that took place. Due to the secretive nature of this community, Don Shan Zefi would also talk to certain crypto-Catholics on my behalf and explain to them the nature of my research and assure them that no harm would come to them from my side. This helped a lot in gaining trust from the participants of this project.

Another method I used to locate other (potential) interviewees was snowball sampling, where existing interviewees would recruit or suggest future interviewees. They were suggesting a wide variety of people, from members of their family to people they have met only once or a few times at a church or at certain events and have shared their common identities, and even people they knew only from social media but have discussed their religious practice and found out they had this crypto-Catholic practice in common. The role of some of them in this project was that they served not only as interviewees, but also as informants. As the priest Don Shan Zefi, they served as a bridge between me and the other potential interviewees, but not as cultural or linguistic interpreters, as all of my interviews due to the nature of the topic(s) discussed were conducted only with my presence and the presence of the interviewee.

⁵³ Ibid.

In mid-August 2021, I went to Letnica, a small village in the South-Eastern part of Kosovo located in the “Skopje’s Black Mountains” and attended the ceremony of the holiday “Our Lady of Letnica”. The holiday is a famous attraction for regional folks from the area, but also for people from other parts of Kosovo, and people from North Macedonia, Albania, and Croatia frequent this ceremony very often. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the frequency of the visits in 2021 was very low compared to the other years, and mostly it was people from nearby areas. As the holiday is visited not only by Roman Catholics, but also by others, especially crypto-Catholics, I used this advantage and talked to the people in the village who were visiting. For this occasion, I was not prepared for interviews, as I did not make an appointment, but I met a future interviewer there who accepted to talk to me in the next few days. I understood that even unbound chatting with visitors there can be of great use. I took notes in my notebook for material I thought might be interesting and useful for further understanding this community.

The process of gaining trust was a very challenging part of my interviews, as I had to talk to people about things they rarely talk about to anyone except their close circle, usually only inside the family. The first important step I took in this process was presenting myself as a learner. Even though I already informed them about the project thesis I am working on and that this is for academic purposes, I always emphasized that I am someone who wants to learn more about it and understand it. The decision on how one presents themselves may be crucial for the interview, as it will affect the process in the interview, since the interviewee will build an impression and that will affect the way they decide to speak.⁵⁴ This can result in a successful or failed interview.

⁵⁴ Andre Fontana, James H. Frey. *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. (London: Sage, 2003), 58-59.

Representing myself as a learner was one of the safest options I could use, as after concluding that I was not here to harm them, the people had the need to explain in detail whatever they were asked.

Another interesting aspect of gaining trust from my interviewees was that, during our presentation talks, my interviewees were interested in knowing why I am interested in this topic. Thereby, I was often asked where I am from, which family and which “fis” did my ancestors belong to. The Albanian society, especially in Kosovo and Northern Albania, until communism was socially organized in tribes or clans, in Albanian language known as fis.⁵⁵ The fis was characterized by a common culture, often common patrilineal kinship, and it was organized with structured tribal chiefs and councils. It is considered the only example of surviving tribal structures in Europe until the 20th century.⁵⁶ When I responded to this question that my ancestors were from the fis of Sopi, a vast majority of my interviewees immediately associated it with certain figures or places, and I was often asked if the Catholic priest Mark Sopi was my relative. Mark Sopi had worked with crypto-Catholicism scholarly, but also had served the community; thereby, he was a positive figure in the eyes of my interviewees. I was also sometimes asked about my religion, especially after telling them I am from the fis of Sopi. As the fis of Sopi is approximately half of Roman Catholic faith and half of them converted to Islam with a high percentage of crypto-Catholics among them, my interviewees felt more comfortable talking to me as they assumed I was one of them, or a “lost member” of their community, as I informed them that I do not belong to this religious group.

1.3 Explaining the settings of the interview

⁵⁵ Robert Elsie. *The Tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture*. (I.B.Tauris, 2015), 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

Establishing a rapport among the interviewer and interviewees is a very important part of conducting oral history. As the goal of such interviews is understanding, the interviewer has to put themselves in the role of the interviewee and try to see the situation from their perspective, rather than imposing the world of academia and preconceptions on them.⁵⁷ In any case, there is a big risk of the interviewer emerging totally into the world of the respondents and becoming more of a spokesperson for them and losing the objectivity one needs for research purposes.⁵⁸ As I was very well aware of this, I did not let myself get lost in it. My intentions are academic, so I had in mind the distance and objectivity I need to have, regardless of the empathy I show to my respondents. They were all aware this study was for academic reasons, and I am not a 'native'.⁵⁹ But the established rapport in the beginning gave them comfort to open up and talk about things they usually do not talk about to strangers, especially someone they saw as a learner and willing to understand them.

Sometimes it is suggested to have a preliminary meeting with the interviewees to get acquainted with the interviewees and make them familiar with the subjects to be discussed.⁶⁰ Depending on the time available I had, I could not arrange longer preliminary meetings with every participant. I decided to leave this to the interviewees, due to their needs or the available time they had for this. I had one preliminary meeting for lunch and two others for a coffee. During these meetings, I avoided getting deep into the topic I am researching, and I did not ask questions that were supposed to be discussed during the interview, so as not to lose spontaneity or allow the interviewees to

⁵⁷ Andre Fontana, James H. Frey. *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. (London: Sage, 2003), 60.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Here meaning practicing the same religious traditions as them.

⁶⁰ Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History: Practical Advice and Reasonable Explanation for Anyone* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 63.

answer questions before the interview.⁶¹ I tried to keep in contact with my interviewees before the interview mostly via phone calls, but also via e-mail and texting on social media. This helped to build rapport among each other. I mostly explained the purposes of the interview and the issues to be discussed during my phone calls I had with my interviewees and at the beginning of the meeting before the interview.

My initial aim was to conduct in-person one-on-one interviews. Nevertheless, the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic was very challenging. Post-structuralist psychology suggests offering the participants in each study a degree of control over the research process as a way to encourage a more equal relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee.⁶² Thereby, I offered my interviewees the option that worked the best for them, namely, to choose between meeting in person or online. I managed to conduct eight of the interviews in person, always letting my interviewees know about my vaccination status and test results for Covid-19. I also offered to wear the mask during the interviews, but all of them politely asked me to take the mask off before the interview started. Two of my interviews were conducted online via Zoom, one due to the location of my interviewee, who was abroad and their return to Kosovo was planned too late. The other interview was conducted online as required by my interviewee, who was having symptoms of Covid-19 and was not sure about their Covid-19 status.

A requirement for online interviews is first for both parties to have a proper device, stable internet connection, and knowledge on how to use those devices and applications on which the interview

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Julian Rappaport, Eric Stewart. *A critical look at critical psychology: elaborating the questions*. (In: Fox D and Prilleltensky I (eds) *Critical Psychology: An introduction*. London: Sage, 1997)

will be conducted.⁶³ This very often depends on class, age, and geography. One of my online interviewees is a middle-aged person who comes from a European country that is pretty much digitalized, so I did not face such issues. The only issue I faced was with the other interviewee, who was from an older generation and had not used Zoom previously, and as emphasized by Deakin and Wakefield, this could often lead to feelings of embarrassment.⁶⁴ We overcame this issue, as I tried to explain to my interviewee how Zoom works and had previous conversations before the interview on Zoom, in order for them to start feeling comfortable with the application. I also suggested to my interviewee that, if they felt more comfortable, we could switch to a different application, which they use more often, but they insisted on doing it on Zoom, as it has the best tool for recording the interview.

I was very much aware of the challenges that come with virtual interviews, as non-verbal communication may be lost.⁶⁵ As I could not see the body position of my interviewee during the interview, their face was clearly seen, and by that, I did not miss the facial expressions or grimaces of my interviewee. The video form of interviewing online is much more helpful than the audio version, as the parties could see themselves, and they could build some sort of relation to each other when talking. I also had to remind my interviewee before the interview that the interview will be recorded, as in online interviews, it is not as visible as in face-to-face interviews when the interviewer constantly sees the device that is recording.⁶⁶

⁶³ Hannah Deakin. Kelly Wakefield. *Skype Interviewing: Reflections of Two PhD Researchers* (Qualitative Research 14 (5), 2014), 605.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 610.

The other in-person interviews were conducted at various spaces. I asked my interviewees where they wanted to meet. The locations they picked were cafes or restaurants, but also some of them preferred their home or office. When I went to the home of the two interviewees, I met their families as well and talked with them before the interview. They shared pictures with me, as well as showed me certain elements of what they believed was their crypto-Catholic heritage, for example, crosses and small statues they kept at home or written prayers and the Bible. Donald Ritchie suggests interviews should be arranged at the interviewee's convenience, and the interviewer must arrive on time, be dressed properly, and not offend the interviewee in any way.⁶⁷ As I had to travel to various regions in Kosovo for my interviews, I always informed my interviewees about the distance I am supposed to take to arrive at the scheduled location, and I always managed to arrive on time. The interviews were conducted only one-on-one, even when meeting before with the family of the interviewees. When the interview started, the other members of the community politely withdrew from the place and offered a more practical space for interviewing the interviewee.

The tape recorder is supposed to be placed in a visible place for the interviewer, but not in the direct line of vision of the interviewee, as it may distract them or make them nervous while talking.⁶⁸ I placed the tape recorder usually at the side of the table in front of us, and after the first few moments, the interviewees ignored it and talked more openly than in the beginning, when sometimes they would look at the tape recorder. I allowed them to know when the recording was starting, so they could be aware that, from that moment on, their words would be recorded and transcribed. I also informed them after the interview when the tape recorder went off. After the

⁶⁷ Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History: Practical Advice and Reasonable Explanation for Anyone* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 63-4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

interviews, namely after the tape recorder had been turned off, I continued talking to my interviewees, mostly about general issues, as it was not easy getting away so quickly with parts of life stories from people who shared them for the first time in such a setting.

The legal issues of the interview were solved by a signed consent form, which was signed by all interviewees and me after the interview. As the memories of the person being interviewed are their personal property, they do have all the copyrights on them, and they should be asked to allow the interviewer to use their memories.⁶⁹ Neunschwander suggests the most common types of agreements are the deeds of gifts; thereby, I used a contract-style transfer agreement.⁷⁰ In that sense, I wrote a consent form, where all the duties and the rights of the interviewees were explained, and they signed the contract form. My consent form included that the interview would be used only for the purposes of my MA thesis at Central European University and will not be used for further projects, as some of my interviewees were not very comfortable with their interviews going viral or being heard by other people. I also verbally assured them a few times that the interviews would be recorded only by me and used only for academic purposes.

Some of my interviewees stated a few times before the interview that this may be a dangerous thing for them to do, and some of them prior the interview accepted to give an interview only when I assured them that their identity would not be outed. I was worried for their well-being and did not want them to feel threatened in any way for giving this interview, so I did my best to protect their identity. Even though some of them did not mind their real names being used for the purposes of this research, but as I consider that this may harm them in some way, I assured them that I will

⁶⁹ John A Neunschwander. *The Legal Ramifications of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

⁷⁰ John A Neunschwander. *The Legal Ramifications of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

use only pseudonyms to protect their identity. Thereby, I will use pseudonyms for nine of my interviewees, except for the Roman Catholic priest, who insisted that his real name should be used.

These ten oral history interviews may not represent a sample of the crypto-Catholics' past in Kosovo in a sociological sense, as they include only a smaller number of members of this community. But, they appear to be the first interviews these people gave on their religious practice for an academic purpose, and when cross-examined with other types of historical sources, they represent a valuable construction of a history not told so often, a history left out and marginalized by scholars and public opinion. Oral history in this sense proved to be the best methodology to approach this community and dig deeper into their stories.

Chapter II: A life between two worlds: origins and the practice of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo

2.1 Conversions to Islam: The origins of crypto-Catholicism

When trying to trace the origin of crypto-Catholicism among Kosovo Albanians, it is unavoidable to go back to the Ottoman Empire and the process of conversion to Islam. Islam was introduced to Albanians in the late 14th century when Balkan lands inhabited by Albanians became part of the Ottoman Empire.⁷¹ In the first period of Ottoman rule over Albanians, mainly only the Albanian aristocracy converted to Islam. Sabrina Ramet states that, even though in the early years of Ottoman conquest of Albanians, conversion to Islam was not required, still many Albanian lords of the time saw converting to Islam as an opportunity for favors and privileges if they converted nominally to Islam.⁷² For the Ottomans, it was upsetting, and they did not favor when a convert would go back to Christianity, as was the case with Gjergj Kastrioti (known as Scanderbeg), who abandoned Islam in which he was raised as a janissary in the Ottoman society and publicly reverted to the religion of his father. According to Ramet, this act by Kastrioti was not only a public act of defiance, but also the first act of revolutionary drama, as after his conversion, Kastrioti required that converts alike revert to Christianity and declared a “holy war” on the sultan/caliph.⁷³ Even though Kastrioti’s representation in Albanian contemporary society is very central, interestingly, all of the interviewees in my oral history research identified him as the main Albanian national hero.

⁷¹ Sabrina P. Ramet. *Nihil obstat: religion, politics, and social change in East-Central Europe and Russia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 209.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Islam was introduced to the Albanian elite class, especially during the rule of Sultan Mehmed II, who conquered the majority of the Albanian inhabited lands in 1466. Under his rule, non-Muslim communities were not prohibited, but Antonina Zhelyazkova states the army, led by Sultan Mehmed II, brought destruction to the Albanians lands by burning the fields, driving away the cattle, and enslaving the captured people.⁷⁴ As revenge for the previous heavy losses inflicted on the Ottomans by the Albanians, the Ottomans left almost no vegetation on the ground.⁷⁵ This was the main reason for the aristocracy to accept Islam in order to save their lands and consolidate their privileged positions, according to Zhelyazkova. But the Albanian peasantry remained Christian.⁷⁶ Part of the Albanian aristocracy of the time migrated to Southern Italy to save their wealth, but also to escape persecution or conversion to Islam.⁷⁷

By embracing Islam nominally, the Albanian aristocracy not only saved their positions and their wealth, but they also used this as an advantage to gain better positions in the Ottoman Empire in the administrative sense. Not only did they keep their wealth, but by accepting Islam, they were also regarded with the title ‘bey’, and many of them became part of the highest political and administrative bodies of the Ottoman state.⁷⁸ Many of them or their descendants in the future would hold very important positions for the Ottoman Empire, becoming “pashas” or “grand viziers”. Namely, by conversion to Islam, they continued and even upgraded their nobility of pre-Ottoman times.

⁷⁴ Antonina Zhelyazkova. *Albanian Identities*. (Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2000), 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ George Nicholas Nasse. *The Italo-Albanian Villages of Southern Italy*. (Washington, District of Columbia: National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council, 1964), 25-26.

⁷⁸ Skender Riza. *Kosova gjatë shekujve XV, XVI dhe XVII* (Tirana, 1987), 426.

The conquest of Albanian lands by Ottomans happened in different periods, as different parts of these lands were governed by different feudal lords. But at a certain point in time, both the North and the South were conquered by the Ottomans. The important difference between North and South Albanians, or Ghegs representing the Albanians north of the river of Shkumbin and Tosks representing Albanians south of the river of Shkumbin, lies not only in linguistic or cultural grounds, but also in religious peculiarities. Before the Ottoman conquest, the majority of Tosks were Orthodox Christians under the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, while Ghegs were majority Catholic Christians.⁷⁹

Peter Bartl argues the process of conversion to Islam among the common Albanian folks began in the late 17th century and became more massive in the 18th century.⁸⁰ According to them, Islamization was very partial, happening in certain areas at different times and was initiated by different motifs and circumstances.⁸¹ But, the spread of Islam among Gheg Albanians in the North was much slower compared to their Tosk Orthodox compatriots. According to Sabrina Ramet, this was due to the resistance of the Catholic Church against the Ottoman rule and, in particular, against the Islamization of the population but also due to geography, as the North had more inhabited mountainous regions, and the Ottomans showed little or no interest at all in administering these places that were difficult to reach.⁸²

Thereby, conversions to Islam occurred first in the cities. The cities or towns were mainly the places where Ottomans had established their administration. This is also the reason Islam was

⁷⁹ Antonina Zhelyazkova. *Albanian Identities*. (Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2000), 16-7.

⁸⁰ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 50.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Sabrina P. Ramet. *Nihil obstat: religion, politics, and social change in East-Central Europe and Russia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 210.

introduced first to the people living in towns and cities and the flatland villages nearby, not in the mountainous regions where the Ottomans had little control in practice and not great interest. Islam was growing rapidly in the bigger cities of the time that served as administrative centers as we can see from the percentage of people declared as Muslims in the years 1582-91, as the city of Peja had already around 90% of Muslims, Vucitern 80%, Pristina 60%, Prizren 56%, Novobrdó 37%, Trepca 21% and Janjevo 14%.⁸³ All of these were important administrative centers of the time in Ottoman Kosovo.

In the early seventeenth century, a significant number of Catholics had converted to Islam. Robert Elsie gives us the example of the town of Prizren at the time, which had 12.000 people declaring themselves as Muslims, 600 as Orthodox, and only 200 as Catholics.⁸⁴ By the end of the 17th century, people who converted to Islam started to outnumber the people who remained in Christianity.⁸⁵ A member of the Catholic mission in Prizren named Gregori Mazreku reported in 1650-1 that the town of Suhareka, which had around 160 Catholic households, had become entirely Muslim, and only around thirty of the women in the town had remained Catholic.⁸⁶

According to Karen Barkey, the Ottoman Empire, especially the first three centuries of its existence, successfully managed to maintain its diversity, and starting in the 18th century, it started to pave a way to interethnic intolerance and violence.⁸⁷ Keep in mind that the Ottoman Empire was an empire built into geographical territories with very diverse population in terms of linguistic

⁸³ Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A Short History* (Prishtina: Koha, 2019), 110.

⁸⁴ Robert Elsie. *Islam and the dervish orders of Albania: An introduction to their history, development and current situation* (published at <http://www.elsie.de/pdf/articles/A1998Islam.pdf>, 1998), 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 237.

⁸⁷ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 114.

and religious background, so it was a necessity for such an empire to try to find ways and mechanisms to control all these diverse groups. It would have been especially difficult to try to maintain an imperial order based on Islam at places where the majority of the population was non-Muslim without any mechanisms of maintaining diversity. In this sense, we can perceive tolerance towards diversities in the Ottoman case more as a necessity to control the masses than as an ideal.⁸⁸

In order to clarify the word toleration in this context, it should not be confused with what is perceived nowadays as a multi-ethnic or multi-cultural society where differences are celebrated and the goal seems to be reaching equality among the communities. The term toleration is used in this context to explain that diverse communities were not persecuted; so in this sense, a tolerant society would be the same as a persecution-free society. Diverse groups were protected as long as they recognized their second-class status and were not exposed to state violence or persecution because of their identities.⁸⁹ Clearly, at certain points of time and at certain places, tolerance was not the main mechanism of the Ottoman empire, especially when in war with other powers.

The reasons for Catholic Albanians converting to Islam are various, and different kinds of motifs can be detected. Numerous studies on this topic have claimed the main reason was economic, namely, avoiding paying the taxes imposed on non-Muslims by the Ottoman Empire. The *cizye* or *harac* was a tax that, in normal circumstances, was paid only by non-Muslims of the empire.⁹⁰ But at certain points of the Ottoman rule, there were also specific taxes implied only on the Catholic population of the empire, such as “*ispence*” or “*resm-i cift*”.⁹¹ These specific taxes usually occurred when the Ottomans were in war with Catholic powers; thereby, extra charges were forced on the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 110

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Catholic population living in the empire, as they were perceived as possible collaborators with the other powers and a possible factor of destabilizing the empire from inside.

Christians had not only the monetary tax to pay to the Ottoman state. The devishirme policy included the recruitment of their boys, aiming to make them serve as soldiers in the Ottoman army or serving in the state administration.⁹² Devishirme was a policy that included taking the young male population from non-Muslim families from the Balkans, bringing them mainly to Istanbul, assimilating them culturally, educating them, and making them serve the Ottoman authorities. But also the conversion to Islam of these boys was included there, as part of their cultural assimilation. They would be converted to Islam, given new names, and they would have to adapt to new religious rules, very different and foreign from their native cultures.⁹³ It was a very popular policy of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the early 17th century.

The devirshirme policy was applied carefully by the Ottoman authorities. For example, they never took two boys from one family or the only son of the family.⁹⁴ Many of the Christian boys from Balkans through this policy were directed towards becoming future Janissaries, while others worked different administrative jobs in the empire. This policy was not applied to all non-Muslims, but it was mainly directed at the Christian population of the Balkans and did not include Jews or Armenians.⁹⁵ The Ottoman authorities also had certain preferences about whom they wanted to recruit in the devishirme. Even though the main target was all Christians from the Balkans, Albanians, Bulgarians and Christians from Bosnia were preferred to be recruited.⁹⁶

⁹² Antonina Zhelyazkova. *Albanian Identities*. (Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2000), 14.

⁹³ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123-125.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹⁶ Hugh Chisholm. *Janissaries*. (Encyclopaedia Britannica. Vol. 5 Cambridge University Press, 1911) 151.

David Nicole has argued that the devishirme policy was a violation of the Ottoman laws and a violation of Islamic laws, as these boys were enslaved and captured without their own will or the will of their family.⁹⁷ On the other hand, Barkley states that some of the families used different methods, such as bribing officers, to keep their sons at home. Nevertheless, others lobbied for their sons to become devishirme.⁹⁸ Many of those who were devishirme, later enjoyed high privileges in terms of their social positions in Ottoman society. Their religion was changed, but often they kept their native language.⁹⁹ Some of them even governed in their native language, some returned to their areas of birth as governors, and they tried to help their families in their homeland.¹⁰⁰ This meant that many of them came back in touch with their former culture and their former religion, or better said, the religion of their parents. Between the mid-15th and mid-17th century, forty-two grand viziers were raised as devishirme, namely Albanian, Greek or Slavic, and only five grand viziers were of Turkish origin.¹⁰¹

Regardless of their social status that some of them gained afterwards, the abduction of young boys from their families and their introduction to another religion and conversion to that religion is not only an unethical policy, but also a traumatic experience for the recruited and for the families as well. In terms of religion, only the recruited devishirme had to convert officially to Islam, but their families remained Christian. Thereby, those who managed to keep contact with their families could have had the chance to practice the religion of their family as well, even though not officially.

⁹⁷ David Nicolle. *Devshirme System* (In Alexander Mikaberidze (ed.) "Conflict and Conquest in the Islamic World: A Historical Encyclopedia". ABC-CLIO, 2011), 273.

⁹⁸ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

⁹⁹ Usually Albanian, Greek or Slavic languages of the Balkans.

¹⁰⁰ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Conversion to Islam was a coping mechanism for Catholic Albanians to save their sons from being recruited, but also a way to avoid paying taxes. Especially keeping in mind the poverty that a lot of Catholic Albanians were dealing with at the time, converting to Islam was a way to survive economically. Many of the Catholic Albanians had been working on the lands owned by the Ottoman Albanian elite or found other jobs as craftsmen.¹⁰² In the 16th century, the tax that the Christian population in the Albanian inhabited lands in Ottoman Empire had to pay was around 40-50 ‘akce’¹⁰³. And in the next century, namely in the 17th century, the tax was around 300-355 ‘akce’ yearly for every Christian household.¹⁰⁴ The conversions among the common Catholic Albanians started more massively in the 17th century, so there is a clear time parallel between the imposed tax on Christians and the conversions to Islam happening. Hence, they were becoming “economical Muslims”.

Georg Stadtmüller states the conversion of Catholic Albanians to Islam was not religious but due to economic and political reasons.¹⁰⁵ The political motivation for conversion to Islam was mainly to gain civil rights and higher social status. As Muslims in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed rights and privileges that were denied to others, with conversion to Islam, Catholic Albanians also gained this status of a first-class citizen.¹⁰⁶ Regardless of their linguistic background, all military and administrative positions in the multi-national Ottoman Empire were available to Muslims but not to others.¹⁰⁷ Conversion to Islam also brought the right to bear arms, and this may have been one of the other motivations for conversion to Islam. According to this, by accepting Islam, the

¹⁰² Gyorgy Lederer. *Islam in Albania* (Central Asian Survey. 13 (3), pp. 331–359, 1994), 334.

¹⁰³ Ottoman monetary coin.

¹⁰⁴ Don Shan Zefi. *Islamizimi I shqiptarëve gjatë shekujve* (Prizren: Drita, 2011), 90.

¹⁰⁵ Georg Stadtmüller. *Die Islamisierung bei den Albanern* ((Jahrbücher für Geschichte Europas, 1955), 404.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 51.

Catholic Albanians not only did not have to pay taxes, but they were also gaining social and economic power in the empire. For two centuries, the Ottoman Empire had a higher number of grand viziers of Albanian origin than those of Turkish origin.¹⁰⁸ Conversions to Islam were the only possibility they had for a successful career in the Ottoman Empire, and many Catholic Albanians took advantage of this. More than any other group in the Balkans, many Albanians were integrated into the Ottoman system of hierarchy and enjoyed high positions.¹⁰⁹

The position of the Catholic Church in the Albanian-inhabited Ottoman Empire had also a catalytic effect on conversions to Islam. The poverty of the church and the lack of Catholic priests in certain areas were also an important factor for Catholics to denounce Catholicism publicly. In the Diocese of Pulat in 1634, there were only two Catholic priests to serve a Catholic community of 20.000 people, while one of the priests was immobile due to old age.¹¹⁰ Also, illiteracy among the clergy was an issue, as it is noticeable in their reports that they had to send to Rome¹¹¹, and this is obvious due to the lack of theological education in the area. Albanian Catholic bishop Frang Bardhi in 1635 reported about the tribe of Kelmendi, which even though still fully Catholic, they had never seen a bishop or knew what a mass ceremony was.¹¹² Thereby, Christianity was not offering a lot to Catholic Albanians, as they were mostly left on their own without a proper religious service. On the other hand, Islam was offering certain privileges that they could have not enjoyed as Catholics. Thereby, the position of the Catholic church in Ottoman Albanian-inhabited lands contributed to a certain extent to conversions to Islam.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Florian Bieber. *Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of Nation States* (Nationalities Papers 28(1):13-28, 2000), 15.

¹¹⁰ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 51-2.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

Even with the Tanzimat reforms of the 19th century, the position of the Catholic church among Albanians did not change much. The Tanzimat reforms brought the so-called ‘millet system’, which granted some sort of “mini-autonomies” to different religious communities. Namely, the Greek Orthodox community, the Armenian community, and the Jewish community directly benefited from the millet system. Their religious institutions that were granted that sort of autonomy not only managed to control religious issues inside their own communities, but they also played a role in the civil life of its members. These institutions were also allowed to maintain their own courts in civil matters (such as marriages, divorces, etc.), to handle issues of education of their own community members, and even to collect taxes.¹¹³ This way, these religious communities were institutionalized, and the way they functioned during the Ottoman Empire can be identified as indirect rule. However, more importance was given to the Orthodox and the Jewish communities than to the Roman Catholic community. The status of the Catholic Church in the Ottoman Empire was not as favored as the Orthodox church, which contributed to Catholic Albanians converting in larger numbers to Islam as compared with their Orthodox compatriots.¹¹⁴

Sabrina Ramet, in her analysis of the conversions of Catholic and Orthodox Albanians to Islam, notes that a pattern can be followed in many cases. Namely, when the Ottoman Empire was at war with Catholic powers, the number of converted Catholics into Muslims rose, and when the Ottoman Empire was attacked by Orthodox Russia, the number of Orthodox Albanians converting to Islam grew.¹¹⁵ It is obvious that the pressure on the local population increased after the Ottoman

¹¹³ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135-142

¹¹⁴ Florian Bieber. *Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of Nation States* (Nationalities Papers 28(1):13-28, 2000), 16.

¹¹⁵ Sabrina P. Ramet. *Nihil obstat: religion, politics, and social change in East-Central Europe and Russia*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 210.

Empire was attacked by powers that shared the same religion as their inhabitants. Actually, citizens were perceived as a potential subject of internal destabilization and conflicts, as they were thought to take the side of the other power(s). By this, the pressure to convert to Islam rose, with higher taxes or sometimes even forced conversions.

Stavro Skendi's observations have pointed out that the Ottoman Empire saw Catholicism among Albanians as a threat, which could organize an attack against the empire and motivate the Gheg Catholic tribes to revolt and fight against the empire.¹¹⁶ The Ottoman doubts came true with the outbreak of Turkish-Venetian war in Crete (1645-1649) when many Catholic Albanians participated in this war on the Venetian side.¹¹⁷ In the 1640s, there were also two attempts organized by Albanian Catholic bishops to aid the conquest of Shkodra¹¹⁸ by Venetian forces, but their plans were discovered by the Ottomans.¹¹⁹ Not only were the missionaries forced to flee the Ottoman Empire, but many Albanian Catholics sought refuge in South Dalmatia, which was administered by Venice. Many of those who remained converted to Islam, and some of them even to Orthodoxy, in order to show their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and avoid persecution.¹²⁰

Another important event that furthered crypto-Catholicism was the revolt that occurred in 1689 when the Austrian army entered the Balkans and arrived in Kosovo. Catholic Albanians, Orthodox Serbs, and crypto-Catholics, namely Albanians who had just recently converted from Catholicism to Islam, assisted and supported the Austrian army. Kosovo Albanian Roman Catholic Bishop and

¹¹⁶ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 236.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Scutari

¹¹⁹ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62.

¹²⁰ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 236-7.

writer,¹²¹ Pjetër Bogdani, and his vicar, Toma Raspasani, organized resistance against the Ottoman Empire and were the leading figures in organizing the Albanians in Kosovo to rebel against the Ottomans.¹²² They assisted the Austrian army with around 6,000 Kosovo Albanian soldiers, both Catholics and crypto-Catholics.¹²³ The aim was to capture Prizren after Prishtina, but the plague was a serious concern at the time.

Soon the Ottomans recaptured Kosovo and a huge number of Albanian Catholics, crypto-Catholics, and Orthodox Serbs fled North, namely to Hungary. Noel Malcolm has noted the report of Pjetër Bogdani's nephew Gjergj Bogdani, who stated that after the Ottomans recaptured Prishtina, they exhumed Pjetër Bogdani's remains¹²⁴ and fed them to the dogs.¹²⁵ Many of the population had fled North due to fear of revenge. Many of them died of hunger or the different illnesses of the time. Malcolm has analyzed the Austrian documents of the time that claimed that not only Catholic Albanians were seeking refuge, but also Albanian-speaking „Turks“.¹²⁶ These were the crypto-Catholics who had converted to Islam due to any of the various reasons mentioned above and had to change their names to Muslim names. However, the Ottomans took revenge on the population that was left in Kosovo, mainly by murdering, torturing, and enslaving the common people of Kosovo as they were perceived as „collaborationists“ of the enemy.¹²⁷

The remaining Catholics who survived and stayed in Kosovo after 1689 had to convert to Islam after the retreat of the Austrian army to show loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and try to escape

¹²¹ Often regarded as the father of Albanian prose.

¹²² Bashkim Iseni. *La question nationale en Europe du Sud-est: Genèse, émergence et développement de l'identité nationale albanaise au Kosovo et en Macédoine* (Peter Lang Ag, 2008), 114.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Pjetër Bogdani had died the same year due to the plague.

¹²⁵ Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A Short History* (Prishtina: Koha, 2019), 200.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 205.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 200-202.

persecution.¹²⁸ As parts of Kosovo were left empty due to the exodus of the refugees, in 1690, the Pasha of Pec deported some Catholics from the mountainous regions of North Albania to the depopulated plains of Kosovo, and they were also converted to Islam.¹²⁹ The Catholic tribes of the North were already representing insurgency for the Ottoman Empire due to their history and rebellions, thereby making them even only nominally Muslims, and moving parts of them from their strategical areas was a way for the Ottoman Empire to try to establish imperial stability.

Other scholars, such as Fatmir Shehu, have argued that the conversion of Albanians to Islam was also motivated by the fear of assimilation into any of the neighboring nations of the time.¹³⁰ They mention that the linguistic challenges Albanians were facing in terms of religion before conversion were mostly that the churches they belonged to did not address their believers in Albanian language, as well as the imposition of certain languages in the churches; for example, all religious books were translated into Slavic languages in Kosovo, and there was a prohibition of books in Latin alphabet, regardless if they were in Latin or Albanian language.¹³¹ But this argument of conversion to Islam in order to gain linguistic freedom is very ambivalent, as Islam was not preached in the Albanian language but mostly in Ottoman Turkish or Arabic. Albanian literary production of the time was almost exclusively in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, or Persian.¹³² Actually, only a few texts in the Albanian language were published from the mid-fifteenth century onwards,

¹²⁸ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 51-2.

¹²⁹ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 237.

¹³⁰ Fatmir Shehu. *The Influence of Islam on Albanian Culture* (International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Journal Of Islam In Asia, Special Issue, No.1, 2011), 401.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Florian Bieber. *Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of Nation States* (Nationalities Papers 28(1):13-28, 2000), 18.

and most of them were using the Arabic alphabet, which was a result of Ottoman influence.¹³³ The argument that Albanians accepted Islam to avoid linguistic oppression or assimilation by other neighbors is contradictory, as their religious language with conversion to Islam did not encourage usage of the Albanian language, but still other language(s). Those languages became influential not only in the religious sense, but also in the literary and administrative sense.

Shehu has also argued that Islam did not require changes of cultural life but only of spiritual belief and dedication towards the Islamic teachings.¹³⁴ They try to imply that Islam was a religion introduced to Albanians by their free will to convert and not by force and that it had unifying effect among the Albanians, as they had to follow its spiritual rules but not change their political, linguistic, or cultural ideologies.¹³⁵ The ambivalence of this lies in the fact that conversions were voluntarily done most of the time, but motivated by different policies that included economic or political violence towards non-Muslims. Thereby, converting to Islam in order to escape paying additional taxes forced on Christian population or to gain rights and civil privileges that only Muslims had cannot be said that it was a free will embracement of another religion. Another issue is that forced conversions also were part of the issue, as explained above with the case of devishmerme or other conversions that happened usually during moments of imperial instability. The last issue is that a large portion of the converts became Muslims only nominally because of the mentioned reasons, but never spiritually or culturally.

Catholic Albanians became Muslims not due to their acceptance and interest in the teachings of Islam but due to political and economic reasons, as well as at certain times to escape direct

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Fatmir Shehu. *The Influence of Islam on Albanian Culture* (International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Journal Of Islam In Asia, Special Issue, No.1, 2011), 402.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

persecution. The Islam introduced to Catholic Albanians was not a faith that had a spiritual dimension among them, but it was just an identity used for already explained purposes. Behind this superficial Islam, many of the converts continued to practice their previous religious traditions and practices.

My interviewees did not know the exact reasons for the conversions of their families;¹³⁶ nor could they trace back the exact date and time the conversion among their ancestors happened. Five out of nine of them were aware in which generation this happened due to their family trees. They detected this through the paternal names of their ancestors going back through the family tree. Namely, the names of their paternal ancestors were all religious names, and when showing me the tree on a piece of paper, as did one of the interviewees, it was very clear the transition from Muslim names to Christian names. The other interviewees that were aware of this generational transition also were counting and saying out loud the names of their paternal ancestors starting from the youngest generations in their family and going back in the past. So, after Bajram, Shaban, Rexhep and similar comes Anton, Mark, Simon and similar. They could count from six to ten Muslim names, and then the Christian ones would come out. Keeping in mind their age and the approximate lifespan, according to their family trees, it turns out that most of the transition in names happens around the 18th century, so the conversions should have happened back then. As conversions among Catholic Albanians to Islam were a gradual process and not a mass movement that occurred from the late 14th century among the elites and continued until the early 20th century,¹³⁷ this difference in the transition of names clearly confirms this.

¹³⁶ Even though some of them used to favor this idea of 'forced conversions' when talking generally about conversions to Islam.

¹³⁷ Florian Bieber. *Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of Nation States* (Nationalities Papers 28(1):13-28, 2000), 22.

Four of the other interviewees who did not have this transition of names believed the conversion happened at the last name on their family tree they were aware of. They would know similarly from six to ten names of their paternal ancestors in the family tree, and suddenly they would stop counting and say that they did not know other older names. As my interviewee Edona claimed, when she was learning the family tree of her origin, and when her grandfather said the last name of the oldest ones he knew, she asked who was before him, namely the father of that person. She got a reply that she was not supposed to ask these kinds of questions because that one was not a Muslim. All four of them believed the interruption of names in their family trees came out due to the same reason; it was a process of someone in the family among the generations doing it on purpose, hiding the Catholic ancestors.

2.2 Manifestation of crypto-Catholicism

Crypto-Christianity was not a rare occasion that occurred in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. Crypto-Christianity could be found all over the empire where conversions to Islam took place. The converts in Cyprus, both Orthodox and Catholics, represent a classical example of crypto-Christianity that occurred in the Ottoman era. Similar to the Albanian Catholic laramans, they were called *Linovamvakoi*, a combination of two words in Greek language meaning linen and cotton, symbolically meaning they were living between Islam and Christianity.¹³⁸ South Albanians or Tosks had also crypto-Orthodox Christians among them. Even though not to the same extent as it is the case with the Catholic Ghegs, crypto-Christianity was also present among Tosk

¹³⁸ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 230.

Albanians.¹³⁹ In the area near the city of Elbasan, there were whole villages of crypto-Orthodox.¹⁴⁰ Hidden religions did not occur only among the Christians of the Balkans, but also among the Jews. Crypto-Judaism was also prevalent in Thessaloniki among the so-called Dönme, who converted to Islam but managed to practice a sectarian form of Judaism and live in between these two worlds.¹⁴¹ What is peculiar about the Iaramans is that they were Roman Catholics, so they became crypto-Catholics. There were no other crypto-Catholics to be found among the Ottoman Empire, not even in Bosnia, where there was a significant number of Catholics. All these groups followed interestingly similar patterns of development without even knowing about the existence of each other around the empire.¹⁴²

Crypto-Catholicism should not be mistaken for the syncretism of religions. As both Catholicism and Islam existed in Kosovo for a long period, obviously they affected each other. The close social life of both Muslims and Catholics in Kosovo led to observation, sharing, and sometimes even appropriation of the other religion. Noel Malcolm names this sort of coexistence as religious amphibianism, and they believe this may have also been one of the reasons for creating an ambient where crypto-Catholicism can survive or flourish among the population.¹⁴³ Malcolm notes this kind of syncretism in Kosovo was present in two ways: either when one part of the family converted to Islam and started practicing it and the rest remained Catholic or through religious intermarriages.¹⁴⁴ For example, the clans of Berisha and Krasniqi were divided among two

¹³⁹ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Marc D. Baer. *The Double Bind of Race and Religion: The Conversion of the Dönme to Turkish Secular Nationalism* (Comparative Studies in Society and History 46-6, 2004), 682-702.

¹⁴² Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 55.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

religions – Muslims and Catholics, but loyalty to the clan and the family was always stronger for them than their religious affiliation.¹⁴⁵ The same was with the clan of Thaçi, which was divided into three sub-religious categories: Catholic, Muslim, and non-pork-eating Catholic.¹⁴⁶

This family or clan closeness with the presence of two of the faiths undoubtedly developed into the celebration of feasts and holidays from both of the traditions and similar occurrences, but that does not imply crypto-Catholicism. Muslims who participated in Catholic celebrations or feasts and performed Christian rituals are not necessarily identified with the Catholic faith and vice versa. During the Ottoman era, many Catholics from such mixed settings used to have even a second Muslim name for the outside world and used this name or their knowledge of the Muslim rituals when it was necessary for them if an advantage was offered.¹⁴⁷

Crypto-Catholicism included the feeling of belonging to the Catholic faith, regardless of the amount or type of practices of this faith practiced. It involved the identification with the Catholic faith and, whenever possible, practicing rituals of this faith. They would nominally represent themselves as Muslims due to certain conditions as explained above, but they believed they could remain „Catholic at heart“¹⁴⁸. Namely, Muslim from the outside and Catholic from the inside. This was, in particular, true among the first generations of converts.¹⁴⁹ When this tradition of such identification has been passed on to the next generations, then we clearly have a pattern of crypto-Catholicism.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁸ This is how crypto-Catholics regarded themselves, including the ones in my interviews.

¹⁴⁹ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 61.

The report of the Catholic Archbishop Marin Bizzi, who had jurisdiction over some of the Catholic parts of Albanian-inhabited lands, talks about the presence of crypto-Catholicism since 1610. Bizzi has noted details about a village where even the Muslim houses used to pay contributions to the Catholic Church.¹⁵⁰ When Bizzi talked to one of the men from the village who was already a Muslim, the man told the Archbishop that he is Christian in his heart, and he wants to live and die according to the Christian faith.¹⁵¹ Bizzi also noted in his report that there were many people like this, especially among Albanians, who preached Christianity secretly but were nominally Muslims in order to avoid tax payment, but he did not sound sympathetic towards this practice, as he advised the man he talked with to change the place he lives and go somewhere where he can practice his faith freely.¹⁵²

Stavro Skendi has analyzed documents from Vatican, and he emphasizes that, in 1743, the Apostolic visitor Nikolic in present-day Kosovo and the nearby areas reported to the Pope that there are two types of Catholics present. The first ones who are openly Catholics, openly profess their Catholic faith and pay the taxes imposed on them, while the second ones are hidden Catholics who profess their religion only at home and in public represent themselves as Muslims in order to avoid paying taxes.¹⁵³

What changed with their conversion to Islam were their names. The converts would get a new Muslim name and sometimes would even attend mosques. Bartl claims that, even when they

¹⁵⁰ *Izvestaj barskoga nadpiskupa Marina Bizzia o svojem putovanju god. 1610 po Arbanskoj i Staroj Srbiji* (Starine, Jugoslavenska Akademija Znanosti i Umjetnosti, XX (1888)) 105-6.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 238.

attended mosques, they had little or no interest at all in learning about their new religion.¹⁵⁴ This was because they were aware of the fact that Islam was only an economic and/or political advantage for them and not a new spiritual path. Many of them, especially the ones living in villages that were not close to towns and cities that were administrative centres, continued to go to church masses or invite priests to their homes to perform Catholic rituals.¹⁵⁵ Among the rituals they continued to practice, Bartl notes that it was getting married in church or in front of a priest, attending mass for major holidays, and even fasting on the required days for Catholics.¹⁵⁶ The Russian consul in Prizren, Ivan Jastrebov, observed that Muslims in the village of Drajqiq in Kosovo were attending the Catholic mass often, and during St. John's day, they also brought candles in the church.¹⁵⁷ During the 19th century in some villages in Kosovo, the same room was used on Fridays as a mosque, namely for the purposes of the Muslim prayer, and during Sundays as a Catholic church, namely for holding a mass ceremony.¹⁵⁸

Baptism by a Catholic priest occurred whenever possible, especially when the first generations of crypto-Catholics baptized their children, usually even before circumcision when it came to their sons. All of them had a secret Christian name alongside their official Muslim names.¹⁵⁹ But to get baptism and other rituals at a certain point became difficult for the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo. As the issue of crypto-Catholicism rose controversies in the Catholic Church due to the high number of nominal conversions to Islam, but continuing to ask for sacraments from the church, so

¹⁵⁴ Peter Bartl. *Kriptokrishtenizmi dhe format e sinkretizmit religjioz te shqiptarët* (Universitas, Nr. 8, 2006, pp. 4-16), 5-6.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Bartl. *ALBANIEN: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg, 1995), 53.

¹⁵⁷ Ivan Jastrebov. *Stara Srbija i Albanija* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2022), 77.

¹⁵⁸ Max Choulbier. *Les Bektachis et la Roumelie*. (Revue des Etudes islamiques, 1927) 448-449.

¹⁵⁹ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 230.

a provincial church council in Lezhe¹⁶⁰ was called in 1703, led by the Archbishop of Antivari Vincent Zmajevic. In this council, it was ordered to stop all the sacraments being given to crypto-Christians, and they insisted on asking them to openly profess their Catholic faith.¹⁶¹ The clergy were also forbidden to offer sacraments to Catholics who publicly ate meat during fast days and to those Catholics who used Muslim names in order to profit from certain advantages.¹⁶²

Similar instructions were issued by Pope Benedict XIV in 1744, and the same strict orders forbidding the clergy from serving hidden Catholics were issued in 1762, 1768, 1840 and 1882.¹⁶³ However, to a certain degree, these prohibitions were functional. Archbishop Matija Mazareku in his 1760's report explains how the situation worsened for crypto-Catholics as they were denied sacraments. According to this report, many crypto-Catholics were turning fully into Islam when denied the Catholic sacraments and developed an aversion towards the Catholic clergy, as Mazareku claims they suffered worse persecution from them than from the real Muslims.¹⁶⁴ Mazareku was asked to baptize a boy who was a crypto-Catholic, but when the boy was asked to profess his religion openly, he refused to do so.¹⁶⁵ According to him, this policy was not only bringing loss of believers, but also creating enemies.

The need to issue these instructions at different times indicates that the local clergy were continuing to offer services to crypto-Catholics, regardless of the prohibitions. In the Skopje

¹⁶⁰ Alessio

¹⁶¹ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 237-8.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Gasper Gjini. *Skopsko-prizrenska biskupija kroz stoljeca*. (Zagreb: Krscanska Sadasnjost, 1986), 143-4.

¹⁶⁴ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Archbishop's report of 1743, it was clearly stated that the priests and bishops were violating the prohibitions by continuing to offer sacraments to these people.¹⁶⁶ Malcolm believes crypto-Catholicism could not have survived without the help of the local clergy, which would secretly offer sacraments to these people, and this was the only way this phenomenon survived among generations.¹⁶⁷ If the clergy did not secretly offer sacraments to parts of the crypto-Catholics, they would have lost them similarly as the ones mentioned in Mazareku's rapport.

The Catholic priest I interviewed claimed they do not offer sacraments to crypto-Catholics, as according to them, now they are not persecuted by any large scale state violence, so they can easily 'come out' as Catholics and live their religious identity openly. However, they stated they are aware of the presence of crypto-Catholics in church masses on Sunday, especially on certain big holidays, and they do not prohibit them from attending the mass, as it is an open ceremony for everyone, not only for Catholics. They stated they have been asked many times to offer sacraments to crypto-Catholics in the post 2000s, and sometimes the request is to visit their home. The priest emphasized that the church does not allow this, but even if it does, they would not want to create problems for these people. When asked what kind of problems, they said that someone could see a Catholic priest entering their home; therefore, a priest could go there only at night and without the garment dress.

At the same time, all the other interviews with crypto-Catholics have confirmed that they or their families receive certain sacraments from Catholic priests, even though I did not ask about the names of the priests as it was not in my interest. Some of them have stated that they or members of their family have received baptism, while all of them have stated that anointing of the sick was

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 64.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

received in their families. All of them have personally participated in masses and have received the sacrament of Eucharist, namely, were fed with bread and wine. Three of the participants have stated that members of their family have confessed to a Catholic priest. My interviewee Robert from Gjilan stated that his grandmother was baptized as a child, but his crypto-Catholic grandfather was not. Nevertheless, when he was sick in his dying bed, his wish was to be officially baptized, and this is how they called a Catholic priest, who baptized the dying old man, so he could die as a Catholic.

The manifestation of crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo has also differed in terms of gender. The women's agency in maintaining crypto-Catholicism has been important since the beginnings of this phenomenon. Thereby, a lot of the literature on crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo has hinted that Kosovo Albanian women were the ones through whom this secret Catholicism has survived in Kosovo. Ottoman authorities required conversions only from men, mainly from the father of the family, and this way, all the family was taken for being Muslim if the „head of the family“ is converted. As the women were not obliged to convert, they remained in their previous faith, namely Catholicism. Only after the second generation of converts, the girls born into the family would be given Muslim names.

Missionaries have often reported about whole communities engaging in only men's conversions to Islam, while their wives remain Catholics.¹⁶⁸ According to Islamic rules, it was allowed for Muslim men to marry Christian women, so many crypto-Catholic men whose identity was officially Muslim would prefer getting married to Catholic Albanian women. This way, they could preserve Catholicism in their homes, but Malcolm states this was also a strategy to enable Catholic priests

¹⁶⁸ Albert Doja. *Instrumental Borders of Gender and Religious Conversion in the Balkans* (Religion State and Society, March 2008, pp 55-63), 60.

more freely to enter their homes so they could also offer sacraments secretly to the other members of the community.¹⁶⁹ Shtjefën Gaspari in the 17th century has noted that, in the Has district of Gjakova in Western Kosovo, there were around 300 openly Catholic women but no openly Catholic men.¹⁷⁰ In the 18th century, there were also women from crypto-Catholic Muslim families married to similar families that had converted officially to Catholicism.¹⁷¹

As the social roles of the genders were divided and public space was reserved only for the menfolk, Kosovo Albanian women were mostly at home. Albert Ramaj states this was a way for them to preserve this tradition, as women would have not so much contact with the Ottoman administration; thereby, at home, they would teach their children Catholic prayers.¹⁷² Ramaj also notes that the role of the fathers was also to take care of their children to get married usually to other crypto-Catholics, as they were the ones who had contact with the outside world and had more contacts.¹⁷³

My interviews also evoked interest in the terms of gender as all 9 of them were mostly introduced to Catholicism through a female figure in their family, sometimes the mother, sometimes the grandmother or an aunt. The female figures taught them Catholic prayers, how to pray, and in certain cases, read the Bible to them. My interview with the priest also indicated that crypto-Catholic women frequent Catholic churches to a higher extent compared to men. A TV interview in 2014 with the Kosovar Muslim cleric Shefqet Krasniqi was meant for him to answer questions from the public who would call. An issue that was brought to Krasniqi by a caller came from a

¹⁶⁹ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 63.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷² Albert Ramaj. *Laramanizmi (Kriptokrishtenizmi) në Kosovë* (Albanisches Institut St. Gallen, 2013), 5.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Muslim man married to a Catholic woman and the woman refusing to convert to Islam. The Muslim cleric stated that those with Catholic wives are mostly *laramans* and use the identities of their wives in order to be closer to Catholic practice and maybe convert themselves to the religion of the wife, but this was not the case.¹⁷⁴

2.3 „The martyrs of Stublla“

All nine of my interviewees, when asked to mention certain events or personalities from Kosovar history and culture that are important to them, gave a high priority to the events of the late 19th century that occurred in South-east Kosovo, namely the expulsions from *Karadag*. This event did not have any major attention in the Kosovar or Albanian historiography before the 1990s. It was mostly in the interests of the Catholic Church of Kosovo and international scholars who focused on this event. After the Kosovo war in 1999, the expulsion of Stublla has gained deeper attention from Kosovar scholars, but also from Kosovar culture and media.

In the Russian Empire, many Jews that converted to Orthodox Christianity due to gain some social and political benefits, after a certain period of time, intended to convert back to Judaism, and they did so. Even though in Russian Empire this was accounted as a criminal offense, many of the converts who converted back to Judaism used the pretext of conversion as cantonists, which found them innocent of these charges.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, in the Ottoman Empire, it was impossible to convert from Islam to Judaism or Christianity, even if you had been a convert through *devshirme* or other forms of conversion. Conversion was possible only from other religions to Islam.¹⁷⁶ Thereby, it was impossible for a person recognized as Muslim to convert to another religion. A

¹⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NECyhH7rB-8>

¹⁷⁵ Robert P. Geraci. Michael Khodarkovsky. *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 105.

¹⁷⁶ Karen Barkey. *Empire of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 125.

group of Albanian men from Rugova area in Western Kosovo, who had Muslim names but in public behaved like Catholics, were condemned to death in 1817.¹⁷⁷

With the Tanzimat reforms that began in 1839 in the Ottoman Empire, it seemed that a more liberal approach was coming towards the understanding of religious practice. In a recruitment for soldiers by the Ottomans that were recruiting only Muslim soldiers at the time, a group of crypto-Catholics in Gjakova and Peja declared that they were not really Muslims but Catholics. They were arrested in 1845, but after six weeks in prison, they were released and only had to pay a fine, but were recognized as Catholics as they claimed to be.¹⁷⁸ Soon after this, 50 other heads of families,¹⁷⁹ also declared they are actually Catholics but just had been acting as Muslims to escape persecution.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, their numbers were progressing.

These series of events motivated a group of crypto-Catholics from South-Eastern Kosovo in February 1845 to ask for their status to be recognized also as Roman Catholic officially. Twenty five 'heads of the families' went from Stublla, Binca, Terzijaj and Vërnakolla to the district's administrative center, which was Gjilan at the time, to ask the Ottoman governor and the court to be recognized as Catholics.¹⁸¹ Not only were they not recognized as Catholics, but they were arrested and later deported. Mark Sopi, who has written the first historical monograph about the expulsions, stated that this was due to the fear of the Ottoman authorities that this was going out of control and a large number of conversions to Catholicism would follow.¹⁸² These crypto-

¹⁷⁷ Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A Short History* (Prishtina: Koha, 2019), 232.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Usually the oldest man in the family

¹⁸⁰ Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A Short History* (Prishtina: Koha, 2019), 232.

¹⁸¹ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 89.

¹⁸² Mark Sopi. *Fenomen ljaramanstva u skopsko-prizrenskoj biskupiji* (Crkva u Svijetu. 7 (3): 271–273, 1972), 272.

Catholics claimed they did not abandon the prophet Mohammed, but they had never actually followed his prophecy.¹⁸³

The Ottoman authorities first imprisoned the crypto-Catholics of these four villages and asked them to pay a fine. But, as their properties were confiscated by the authorities, they failed to pay the fine; therefore, 150 of them, alongside their priest, were exiled to Mohalic, a marshy place in Anatolia.¹⁸⁴ Many of them died during their time on exile, and they were allowed to go back to their homes in Kosovo two years after their exile, only after a diplomatic intervention of the Great Powers, especially by Great Britain.¹⁸⁵¹⁸⁶

The history of persecution of these crypto-Catholics has been represented by the Catholic Church of Kosovo as one of the major events that happened to the Iaramans, and this persecution is often used as the reason many of them even nowadays are afraid to 'come out' as Catholics. In recent times, they are often represented not only as martyrs for their own faith, but as Albanian victims of Ottoman oppression, even though their oppressors in Gjilan were also Albanians of Muslim faith, meanwhile their history of exile is romanticized not only by Iaramans or Catholic Albanians, but also by other non-Catholic Albanians. Folk singer Nikollë Gjini composed a traditional Kosovo Albanian song with *çifteli* that tells the story of these crypto-Catholics. The songs with *çifteli* are usually accompanied by epics or ballads and usually talk about important events for Albanians.

¹⁸³ Stavro Skendi. *Crypto-Christianity in the Balkan Area under Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press: Slavic Review, Jun., 1967, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 227-246), 239.

¹⁸⁴ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 66.

¹⁸⁵ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 90.

¹⁸⁶ Skendi explains that the pressure of Great Britain, which was a non-Catholic state comes from Stratford Canning, Great Britain's ambassador to the Porte, that an imperial declaration was made in 1844 forbidding the death penalty for apostasy from Islam in the case of earlier converts from Christianity who wished to revert to their original religion

The construction of this event has often gained mythological elements of the martyrdom of Albanians during the Ottoman Empire.

Chapter III: Crypto-Catholicism in contemporary Kosovo

3.1 Building of Kosovo's identity and the dynamics of religious identities

The identity of Kosovo Albanians is highly affected by Albanian identity. In the 19th century, when ideas of nation-states and nations started to develop, there was no national difference among Albanians from Kosovo and those from Albania. However, in the post-Ottoman Balkan space, Kosovo and Albania developed separately from each other. The space of Kosovo was both important for Serbs and Albanians, as the first ones based their medieval history and mythology in Kosovo, while the second ones believe they are descendants of the ancient Illyrians, who inhabited the territory of Kosovo in ancient times.¹⁸⁷

In Ottoman Kosovo, religious identity was the main one that drew the line of differences among the communities, and this has changed to a certain extent only in the late Ottoman era when nation building was occurring in former imperial subjects.¹⁸⁸ Thereby, religious affiliation was more important for members of the community to build family relations, such as marriages. But this was also an indicator of the social and political status of the members. However, there were exceptions, especially among the Albanian Northern tribes in Kosovo; for example, members of the same clan, being both Catholics and Muslims, would not intermarry among each other. This was not due to religious differences, but members of the same clans did not intermarry among themselves, as they believed to have a common ancestor.¹⁸⁹ Hence, even if a part of the clan had converted to Islam, after a few generations, they would still not intermarry with other members of the same clan who

¹⁸⁷ Bujar Aruqaj. *Construction of Nationalism in the Republic of Kosovo* (Pristina: The Politics of Deeply Divided Societies, 2013), 4.

¹⁸⁸ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 29.

¹⁸⁹ Noel Malcolm. *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of Albanians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 56.

had remained Catholics. However, in certain cases, they would marry Catholics of other clans, in particular Muslim men marrying Catholic women, for obvious reasons argued in the previous chapter.

When Albania formed its nation-state in 1912 and declared independence from Ottoman Empire, Kosovo was left out of the borders of Albania. The historian Noel Malcolm argues that Kosovo as a territory was conquered by Serbia in 1912, as even according to Serbian sources of the time, the majority of the population in 1912 was ethnically Albanian and did not welcome Serbian rule. Instead, they organized both military and peaceful resistance.¹⁹⁰ It was treated as occupied territory until 1918, when it was integrated into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia without the free will of the majority of the population, as in their national consciousness, they believed that they belong to Albania.¹⁹¹ As such, it remained part of Yugoslavia with a small interruption during World War II, and later, it was again included in Socialist Yugoslavia in 1945. Robert Elsie has argued that, after World War II, the Yugoslav side would not respect the agreement known as the Resolution of Bujan signed with Albania, which had the aim to allow the people of Kosovo to decide on a referendum whether they want to be part of Yugoslavia or Albania.¹⁹² This reinforced the collective idea for struggle for self-determination and independence from Yugoslavia, especially since the status of Kosovo in Yugoslavia was not even recognized as a republic. Instead it was treated as an autonomous province of Serbia with very unbalanced power dynamics and often state-based persecutions against the civilian population.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Noel Malcolm. *Noel Malcolm: Is Kosovo Serbia? We ask a historian*. (The Guardian, February 26, 2008).

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² *The Resolution of Bujan, 1944* (available at http://www.albanianhistory.net/1944_Resolution-of-Bujan/index.html) .

¹⁹³ Anna Di Lellio. *The Case for Kosova: Passage to Independence* (Anthem Press, 2006)

According to this, Albania and Kosovo developed separately in social, political, and cultural terms during the 20th century, and according to Anderson's theory, this collective narrative that holds together the members of Kosovo's community create this new 'imagined community'.¹⁹⁴ The emotional legitimacy that Anderson talks about in post-war Kosovo was built according to the historical changes that occurred all over through the 20th century, their meaning, and the ways they came into historical being.¹⁹⁵ However, this has not influenced the majority of the Kosovar Albanians to declare their ethnic identity something other than Albanian. Opposite to that, the ethnic Albanian identity was reinforced in Kosovo, especially in the crisis of the 1990s, while the different narratives and experiences with Albanians from Albania have developed mostly into the notion of Kosovar being understood more as a regional, cultural, or even political layer of an identity, but inside the umbrella of Albanian ethnic identity. Undoubtedly, all ten of my interviewees stated they are Albanians and Kosovar is only their citizenship, namely they are holders of passports of Republic of Kosovo, but as four of them noted, Kosovar to them also represents the different experiences through history that have built them separately from Albania. Few of Kosovo's intellectuals after the Kosovo war have supported the idea of a Kosovar identity on a national level as opposed to the Albanian national identity, but this has not gained enough popularity among the majority of the Kosovo population.¹⁹⁶

The building of a national Albanian identity in Kosovo and, by this, the Albanian nationalism in Kosovo was very similar to Albania. Language played a central role in the feeling of belonging to

¹⁹⁴ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Rev. and extended ed. London: Verso, 1991)

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Lendrit I. Mehmeti. *Kosovar Identity: Challenging Albanian National Identity* (Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies, vol.9 (1), pp.16-25, 2017), 20-23.

the Albanian nation.¹⁹⁷ The foundation of the Albanian national identity, thereby of Albanian nationalism, developed as non-religious, namely secular.¹⁹⁸ Unlike many of their Balkan neighbors, where religious affiliation is strongly linked to ethnic identity, this was not the case with the building of the Albanian national identity. Due to the reason that the end of Ottoman Empire found Albanian speaking people divided into three main religions: Islam, Roman Catholicism and Christian Orthodoxy, but also other minor religious groups¹⁹⁹, Albanian intellectual elites of the 19th and 20th century viewed religion as a problematic issue for the development of Albanian national identity.²⁰⁰ Religious divisions should have been a big problem for the creation of a united Albanian national identity as it was not a common ground that could lead to unity among the members of this ethnic community. Therefore, language, culture, and the feeling of common blood, namely ancestors, were the main markers of creating this national identity in both Kosovo and Albania.²⁰¹

Lendrit Mehmeti has argued that religion as a marker of national identity for Albanians could have been dangerous, dysfunctional, and unrealistic based on the political and social situation of the time. It was dangerous due to the fact that an Albanian national identity based on any of the existing religions would mean excluding another part of the Albanian speaking population and probably their assimilation into neighboring nations.²⁰² It was dysfunctional in the sense that Albanians of

¹⁹⁷ Aydin Babuna. *The Bosnian Muslims and Albanians: Islam and Nationalism* (Nationalities Papers 32, no. 2, 2004), 287-321.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Judaism, Protestantism, etc.

²⁰⁰ Lendrit I. Mehmeti. *Kosovar Identity: Challenging Albanian National Identity* (Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies, vol.9 (1), pp.16-25, 2017), 18-19.

²⁰¹ Aydin Babuna. *The Bosnian Muslims and Albanians: Islam and Nationalism* (Nationalities Papers 32, no. 2, 2004), 294.

²⁰² Lendrit I. Mehmeti. *Kosovar Identity: Challenging Albanian National Identity* (Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies, vol.9 (1), pp.16-25, 2017), 19.

any religion did not manage to create administrative centers of their religious institutions, for example, the Orthodox Serbs who were united around the Serbian Orthodox Church.²⁰³ By unrealistic, they explain that they mean ideological confusion, as the already produced myths, legends, and heroes of the 19th century were established around national figures, who belonged to various religions and not to religious figures.²⁰⁴ The Albanian National Awakening was influenced by the verses of the Albanian poet Pashko Vasa:²⁰⁵ “*Churches and mosques you shall not heed, the religion of Albanians is Albanianism*”, as this phrase turned out to be a very common phrase used since 19th century until nowadays for promotion of unity between Albanians and a secular nationalism.²⁰⁶ The need to bury religious differences is a recurring topic in Albanian literature of the 19th and 20th century. This shows there were still religious issues among the Albanians, despite the ideals of the Albanian elites of the time. Religion played a central role in the identities of these people for centuries before, and obviously, it was not easy to remove it as fast as possible.²⁰⁷

Even though a pan-Albanian national identity was not built in terms of religions, this unity functioned more as an ideal norm, in terms of policies of identity, as both Catholics and Muslims of Kosovo would identify as Albanians and very often shared and contributed to the same political goals. However, on social and inter-personal terms, it was still the religious norms of the Ottoman religiously divided society that haunted Kosovo’s society in the 20th century. For example, marriages were not so common among Catholic and Muslim Albanians for most of the 20th century in Kosovo.²⁰⁸ Kosovan actress Leze Qena in a TV show talking about her personal life has revealed

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Himself a Roman Catholic Albanian.

²⁰⁶ Robert Elsie. *History of Albanian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, Vol. 2, 1995) 262-264

²⁰⁷ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000),155.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

that her family gave up on her after she, as a Catholic Albanian, married the famous Kosovar actor of a Muslim background, Xhevat Qena, in the 1950s, but also that her family members have threatened her life and the life of her husband.²⁰⁹ In the area of Gjakova in Western parts of Kosovo, a Catholic priest was kidnapped in 1907. After this event, heads of slaughtered pigs were thrown in the garden of the mosque in the village of Smolnica on Eid's day, while the walls of the mosque were painted with the blood of the pigs.²¹⁰ This resulted in the Muslim population boycotting the Catholic population, namely boycotting their shops. A similar scenario happened in Prizren, with the boycott of Catholic-owned shops.²¹¹

Hostility among the different religions was felt on different levels in certain parts of Kosovo.²¹² But still, ethnic differences were of greater importance than religious differences inside the same ethnic community.²¹³ The Serb-Albanian conflict replaced the older religious divisions of Christians vs. Muslims, and even religious rivalry was transformed into ethnic antagonism.²¹⁴ Also within religious communities, the ethnic dimensions started to become more important in the 20th century Kosovo, and Orthodoxy was identified mostly with the Serbian ethnic community, while Islam and Roman Catholicism with the Albanian community.²¹⁵ The ethnic differences were the main markers of the animosity and hostility among the communities; for example, despite their

²⁰⁹ *Lemza* (Tribuna Channel, directed by Kiki Rrahmani, aired on November 18 2016, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUKmfjeO6K0>).

²¹⁰ Nathalie Clayer. *Në Fillimet e Nacionalizmit Shqiptar* (Tirana: Përpjekja, 2009), 491.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 155.

²¹³ Ibid., 157.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

common Christianity, Catholic Albanians showed more antagonism towards Serbian Orthodox community than towards Muslim Albanians.²¹⁶

Three Kosovan Catholic priests, Father Gjon Bisaku, Father Shtjefën Kurti, and Father Luigj Gashi, wrote a memorandum addressed to the League of Nations in 1930, addressing the issues on going in Kosovo. Their desperate appeal shows not only the bad situation of the Catholics of Kosovo but also that of the Muslims. Among other things, they mention that under Serbian rule there is a lack of political and educational rights, the prohibition for using Albanian language, and colonization; they also mention the active motivation of Muslims to emigrate to Turkey and Catholics to Albania.²¹⁷ Similar reports can be found from the Archbishop of Skopje's Diocese, which included all the territory of modern-day Kosovo, Lazër Mjeda. His reports were mostly directed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary, which back then had a leading role in the protection of the Catholic population in the Balkans. In Mjeda's reports, it is visible that he became a spokesperson not only for the Catholic population, but also for the Muslim population of Kosovo, complaining about the Serbian treatment of both Catholics and Muslims in Kosovo.²¹⁸ The absence of reports from both Catholic and Muslim religious clerics about the inter-religious animosity tells us that these conflicts they saw as conflicts inside the same identity and group and something to be resolved by themselves alone. But, for their issues with the Serbs, they asked for the support of the international community or third parties.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 157.

²¹⁷ Gjon Bisaku, Shtjefën Kurti & Luigj Gashi. *The Situation of the Albanian Minority in Yugoslavia* (Memorandum Presented to the League of Nations in 1930, First published in R. Elsie, "Gathering Clouds: the Roots of Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo and Macedonia", Dukagjini Balkan Books (Peja 2002), p.47-96.)

²¹⁸ Gjon Berisha. *Imzot Lazër Mjeda: Mbrojtës dhe Lëvrues i Identitetit Shqiptar* (Pristina, 2011), 47-172.

Some of the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo awaited the end of the Ottoman Empire as an opportunity to convert to Catholicism officially. The new Serbian administration ruling over Kosovo did not sympathize with the idea of crypto-Catholics reverting to Catholicism. The government asked the bishop of Skopje Janez Gnidovec to stop with practices such as baptizing Muslims, who were crypto-Catholics. At the same time, the official representatives of the Muslims in Kosovo were informing Belgrade's government about such occurrences.²¹⁹ The Archbishop Lazër Mjeda in 1912 writes a letter to Vatican and, in 1913, a letter with a very similar content to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary, where he claims that in Kosovo there are many hidden Catholics who have waited for the recession of the Ottoman Empire in order to practice their faith freely, but now they are prevented from doing so by the new Serbian rule over Kosovo's territory.²²⁰ Mjeda has attempted many times to contact different cardinals and different foreign powers regarding crypto-Catholics and making their conversions possible.²²¹ There were also prohibitions by Belgrade's government for Catholic priests to have contact with crypto-Catholics, especially their homes to be visited by the priests.²²² Austrian press of the time also reported about the position of secret Catholics in the new territories conquered by Serbia.²²³

Muslim Albanians who wanted to convert back to Catholicism according to Belgrade's policies had the option to convert to Christian Orthodoxy if they aimed at becoming Christians or to remain Muslims, but it was not allowed to convert to Catholicism.²²⁴ One of the main reasons for this is

²¹⁹ Nikola Žutić. *Rimokatolička misija i klerikalizam na Kosovu i Metohiji u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1999), 108.

²²⁰ Don Ndue Ballabani. *Imzot Lazër Mjeda: Mbrojtës dhe Lëvrues i Identitetit Shqiptar* (Zagreb: Misioni Katolik Shqiptar në Kroaci, 2009), 125-133.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 131.

²²³ *Serbien und Katholiken*. (in: Reichsposts (Nachmitagausgabe) 27. 12. 1912).

²²⁴ Don Ndue Ballabani. *Imzot Lazër Mjeda: Mbrojtës dhe Lëvrues i Identitetit Shqiptar* (Zagreb: Misioni Katolik Shqiptar në Kroaci, 2009), 128.

that Catholics were perceived as close to Austria-Hungary by Serbian institutions of the time, and that was not in favor of Serbian interests. Another reason is the planned ethnical cleansing of Kosovo and Macedonia from Albanian population by the Serbian government and colonizing it with Serbian population.²²⁵ As the ethnic cleansing mainly took part in forcing Albanian Muslims to declare as Turks and afterwards deporting them to Turkey, this would have been an impossible plan if a significant number of them converted to Catholicism, as the Turkish identity in the context of the time was strongly associated with the Muslim community.²²⁶

The Kosovo Albanian movement for independence from Yugoslavia and the secularization process that was on a massive scale during Socialist Yugoslavia were the main factors to suppress the other identities, especially the religious ones, while it encouraged the ethnic Albanian identity. As the new socialist regime created the *Islamic Community of Yugoslavia* in 1947, which by many was seen as an attempt to control the Muslims inside the state and the religious affairs by the state, many Muslim Albanians from Kosovo distanced themselves from this community, as it was perceived as part of the regime and an attempt to destroy their struggles for independence.²²⁷ Also, keep in mind that the heads of this community were mostly Bosnian Muslims and Macedonian Muslims. Kosovar Muslims were marginalized and therefore distanced themselves from this religious organization.

Political unity among Catholic and Muslim Albanians in Kosovo became more prevalent during the 1990s with the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy by Slobodan Milosevic's regime. This

²²⁵ Vladan Z. Jovanović. *IN SEARCH OF HOMELAND? MUSLIM MIGRATION FROM YUGOSLAVIA TO TURKEY 1918–1941*. (Tokovi istorije 1-2:56-67, 2008).

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Amjad Molaeb. *Kosovo's Islamic Model and its Changing Faces: The Radicalization Process that Threatens Kosovo* (New York: The New School, 2015), 20.

reinforced the idea that they were being persecuted for being Albanians, speaking Albanian language, and having a common culture and traditions regardless of religion. Hence, this was an attack on their ethnic identity, which both Muslims and Catholics had in common. Catholic intellectual Anton Çeta in the early 1990s organized a successful campaign of reconciliation of blood feuds in Kosovo and travelled all around Kosovo, managing to reconcile more than 2000 blood feuds that were present.²²⁸ This was also a reaction to the Serbian regime of the 1990s, as the message was clear that they were forgiving each other's feuds. Muslims and Muslims, Catholics and Catholics, but also Catholics and Muslims, were uniting themselves in the cause to fight against the oppression of the 1990s.

The Muslim cleric Idriz Kokrruki in 1990 stated that Albanians do not need religion if it threatens their unity.²²⁹ Kosovo Albanian intellectuals in 1989 founded the Democratic League of Kosovo, which led the peaceful resistance against Belgrade's oppression in Kosovo throughout the 1990s.²³⁰ This new political movement that had the support of the majority of Kosovo's population included both Kosovar Muslims and Catholics.²³¹ It was the same with the military resistance, which organized itself through the Kosovo Liberation Army and included Kosovo Albanians of all religions. Pren Marashi, an officer of the Kosovo Liberation Army, has stated that he is not a Catholic soldier but an Albanian from the Kosovo Liberation Army, and that religious differences are not even important when different subjects are facing the same enemy.²³²

3.2 Secularization of Kosovo

²²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ardian Gola. Gëzim Selaci. *Socio-political and Religious Dynamics in Kosovo from the Post-Secularist Perspective* (Croatian Political Science Review, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 85-108, 2017), 92.

²³² Pren Marashi: *Nuk jam ushtar katolik, jam shqiptar i UÇK-së* (Pristina: Gazeta Express, 09.11.2020)

During the socialist period in Yugoslavia, Kosovo's society was characterized by an indifference towards religion, and the relation towards religion was reduced to the level of nominal identification with any of the religions, while lacking a deeper practice or systematic engagement with the rituals, except in the cases of burials or celebrations of big holidays of any religion.²³³ In this process, according to scholars, secularism has to do a lot with 'life modernization' where state institutions seem to be enough to provide a good quality of life without the need for religious institutions.²³⁴ This also has to do with the economic factor, meaning when a society is developed, its citizens do not depend on religious institutions or individualism, namely individuals having the freedom to choose the ways they will live their lives.²³⁵ This brings the understanding that societies going through the phase of secularization, regardless of their level of religious practice, are diverging from religious institutions. Drietero Arifi and Ylber Sela have stated that other factors that encouraged secularism in Kosovo were the need for survival, which did not allow the luxury of practicing in-depth religion as Kosovo was in almost a constant state of political insurgency, the influence of the communist ideology, and the lack of its own state institutions that could have institutionalized religious centers in the national framework.²³⁶

This process of secularism that was happening in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century has reshaped religious identities and their manifestations in the public sphere. This has affected not only the Roman Catholic, Muslim, or Serbian Orthodox identity in Kosovo, but also the crypto-Catholic identity. Still, traces of crypto-Catholicism can be found in the reports of the

²³³ Ardian Gola. Gëzim Selaci. *Socio-political and Religious Dynamics in Kosovo from the Post-Secularist Perspective* (Croatian Political Science Review, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 85-108, 2017), 86.

²³⁴ Pollack Detelf: *Religious Change in Europe: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Findings*. (SAGE Publications, 2008), 169-179.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Drietero Arifi. Ylber Sela. *Kosovar Society through Secularism and Religion* (ILIRIA International Review, pp. 305-317, 2013), 312-3.

Vincentian Sisters of Charity that worked in Kosovo during the period of socialism. However, their activity in the 20th century in Kosovo was mostly based in South-eastern parts of Kosovo, namely around the Karadak area where a significant number of Catholics lived, but also a region with a crypto-Catholic tradition, as explained in the previous chapter when talking about the “martyrs” of Stublla. Most of these Catholic nuns coming from Slovenia were astounded by people of Muslim background asking for religious favors from them.²³⁷

Himelina Drenik in 1980 noted that many people came to their ambulance and confessed to her for being secretly Catholics, going to church on big holidays and lighting candles, but also being very cautious that their neighbors do not notice any of these manifestations.²³⁸ She also emphasizes the case of an Albanian Muslim woman walking for hours with a sick three-month-old baby from another village to their ambulance. When the nuns told her that it was impossible for the baby to survive due to the difficult conditions, the woman asked if the baby could be baptized before death, as she claimed to be secretly Catholic, and her baby was baptized just before death.²³⁹

Crypto-Catholicism was present during socialist Yugoslavia, but due to the already mentioned processes and changes that occurred, it had changed its shape. As well as in certain regions, it was more present, especially in villages and mountainous regions as opposed to bigger industrial towns and cities. It has also to do with generational change. While most of my interviewees were people living their youth during socialist Yugoslavia, the gap on how they manifested this practice and how they described their parents or grandparents were practicing this tradition, it was drastically different, with the ones living as youth during socialism perceiving this practice more of a cultural

²³⁷ Albert Ramaj. *Laramanizmi (Kriptokrishtenizmi) në Kosovë* (Albanisches Institut St. Gallen, 2013), 23.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

identity or historical and traditional importance than as a spiritual necessity. This is concluded according to their answers on general opinions on religions, the church, their frequencies in the church, ways of celebrating holidays, etc., which were drastically different from what they described as practices of their family ancestors.

3.3 The comeback of crypto-Catholicism in post-war Kosovo

The struggle for self-determination and later the nation building process as an independent country have raised various questions among the Kosovar intellectuals and the public, such as ‘who are the Albanians?’, ‘Do we belong to the West or to the East?’; ‘Are we Europeans or Muslims?’, and other similar questions that were associated with religious practice and identity in Kosovo. The role of Islam among Albanians was a wide topic discussed in Kosovo, especially after the Kosovo war, and often the perception of Islamization of Albanians was negatively represented.²⁴⁰ Robert Elsie has analyzed the perception of the modern-day Albanian scholars about the Ottoman Empire, and he concludes that the major representation in Albania and Kosovo about the Ottoman period is mostly negative with the scholarship portraying the Ottomans as an obstacle for the Albanian culture to flourish in the cradle of European civilization.²⁴¹

Some Albanian scholars who tend to have a more balanced view on the Ottoman era, such as Hasan Kaleshi, have argued that the only positive outcome of the Ottoman invasion of Albanian inhabited lands was that it saved them from being assimilated into Slavs, comparing it to what they called the Slavic invasion of the Balkan area in the sixth century that put an end to the Romanization process of the Albanians.²⁴² Such claims are contradictory to the ways the Ottoman Empire

²⁴⁰ Cecilie Endresen. *Diverging images of the Ottoman legacy in Albania* (Berlin: Lit Verlag. pp. 37–52, 2011), 48.

²⁴¹ Robert Elsie. *Albanian literature: A short history* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 34.

²⁴² Ibid.

functioned because Albanians were not recognized as an ethnic minority. Actually, the official division and recognition of the population in the Ottoman era was according to the religious affiliation of the communities and not according to their linguistic or cultural backgrounds.

The topic of conversions to Islam and Islam's role in the lives of citizens was also discussed by leaders of religious organizations. The Muslim leaders tend to represent that conversions to Islam were voluntary among Albanians, while Catholic leaders have tendencies of representing the conversions to Islam due to the anti-Christian policies of the Ottoman Empire and Islam as a foreign element in Albanian culture that disrupts the unity of Albanians.²⁴³ Endersen compares the Albanian Catholic view on conversions to the Serbian nationalist views on the Slavic people converting to Islam, and she finds a similarity in the portrayal of the conversions as an attempt to disrupt national identity.²⁴⁴ However, the Albanian Catholic clergy does not exclude the converts from the national identity and portrays them as innocent victims of "occupier's policies" instead of "traitors", as in the Serbian nationalist case.²⁴⁵ Similarly, the Muslim clergy does not exclude those who did not convert to Islam from Albanian national identity.²⁴⁶

The views of my interviewees were much closer to the stances of Catholic leaders when it came to the process of conversions and the role of Islam in Albanian culture. The majority of them stated that Islam was forcefully introduced to their ancestors and perceived the conversions to Islam as a 'national tragedy for Albanians'. Therefore, they also believed Islam is in contrast to some Albanian traditions, and as such, it cannot integrate its values well into the Albanian culture.

²⁴³ Cecilie Endresen. *Religion und Kultur im albanischsprachigen Südosteuropa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp. 233-258, 2010). 237-241.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 241.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

„It was forceful conversion. No matter if they [Ottomans] used different methods such as tax payment or it was with a threat with a sword on your neck. Both of these ways indicate a conversion because you are forced to, because you need to survive and not due to love for the religion of Islam. Albanians are very well aware of this regardless of some recent pro-Islamic propaganda that is being spread.” (Gjon, 47)

“It is in contrast with our identity of being Albanian. First of all, Islam requires that you are first Muslim and then anything else, but you know...Albanians are first Albanians and then anything else. Religion never played a dominant role in identifying us as Albanians. Tomorrow I can claim to be a Buddhist if I want to, but I will still remain Albanian. Religions are changeable, but ethnicity is not. It is the blood, the genetics, the tradition that you cannot change. And some rules of Islam require to distance from Albanian traditions. For example, the prohibition to drink alcohol is not applicable in Albanian culture, as we are used to celebrate our joys with alcohol. Not only when it comes to consume, but also as producers of alcohol we are quite famous. Many friends of mine who live abroad and have contacts with Muslims of other nationalities are being told that they are not real Muslims... [laughs] because they do not adhere fully to what Islam asks them to.” (Drita, 34)

After the Kosovo war, topics of conversion of crypto-Catholics officially to Catholicism were prevalent not only in Kosovan media, but they also gained the attention of international media. In the early 2000s, conversions to Catholicism started to occur all around Kosovo, and sometimes they were open to the public, and even the media were present in these ceremonies. Just a few months after Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008, London-based news agency Reuters reported that some crypto-Catholics of Kosovo are out of hiding, and their ‘coming out’ is officially made through embracing the faith they belong to, namely, getting baptized and recognized as Catholics.²⁴⁷ In an interview for Reuters, the Catholic priest Don Shan Zefi claimed that the Catholic Church is not making appeals to crypto-Catholics to convert, but that they are the

²⁴⁷ Fatos Bytyci. *Out of hiding, some Kosovars embrace Christianity* (Reuters, September 28, 2008).

ones that are contacting the church. They mention that it is not talked about individuals anymore, but a whole mass of people, including whole villages, who are willing to convert to Catholicism.²⁴⁸

Religion Watch's report in 2007 has compared the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo with the crypto-Jews of Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition.²⁴⁹ In their article, they talk about how whole communities of crypto-Catholics in Rugova and Drenica regions of Kosovo have also managed to build their own churches in the areas.²⁵⁰ Washington Post in 2015 reported about crypto-Catholics in Kosovo, mentioning certain cases of conversion and their approach to the Catholic Church, but also talked about the hesitancy of crypto-Catholics in the village of Zhegër who were not willing to be outed to the public.²⁵¹ According to the reportage of Washington Post, parts of crypto-Catholics were still not so open to discussing their religious practices in public. A Kosovar Catholic priest interviewed by Washington Post has stated that crypto-Catholics are still afraid to 'come out'.²⁵²

Even though some conversions took place and they are an on-going process in post-war Kosovo, their official number is unknown, as the Catholic Church has not made public all of the conversions that took place. According to the last census in 2011, only around 40,000 citizens of Kosovo declared themselves as Roman Catholics in a population of almost 2 million.²⁵³ This may indicate the migration of Roman Catholics (including crypto-Catholics) to other parts of the world, in particular Western Europe, but also the lack of official conversions. None of my interviewees were

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Richard Cimino. *Crypto-Catholics embrace the faith openly in Kosovo* (Religion Watch, March 01, 2007).

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Valerie Plesch. *Muslim Kosovars rediscover their long-forgotten Roman Catholic roots* (Washington Post, May 6, 2015).

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ United Nations Statistics Division. *Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011 - Final Results: Quality Report* (unstats.un.org, 2011).

officially converted to Catholicism, even though they expressed themselves and identified as Catholics.

„There is a lack of mass movement for official conversions. I talked to the priest, they said whenever I feel ready I can do it, but I do not know. In the '90s we were discussing much more about this. Especially with colleagues at work. In free Kosovo, after Serbia is gone we can be whatever we are. We could regain our identity. It was a really big enthusiasm back then, especially among intellectual circles. And it was not only on terms of conversation, but also planning. We were really planning to do it. We would talk to the church and meet other similar people. But after the war I do not know what happened. The people just disappeared. If you try to talk to some of them about this plan from the '90s, they will just avoid talking to you anymore about it. I think they are afraid. Some of them do not really have time and energy to invest in such debates anymore, as they have to work a lot and have no time for religion. I was ready to do it if we did it all together, as it was planned to. But now I am all alone.” (Kastriot, 52).

„I have thought about it [meaning conversion], but I do not know. We talked with my husband, but I do not want to harm our children. For us it is late [smiles], we cannot harm ourselves, but our children. It would be difficult for them to get married then. There are still many fanatics and it is a small place. Everything is discovered sooner or later. Maybe, maybe, I do now know, maybe later, after our children are grown ups and have already established their lives.” (Arta, 37)

Duijizings has also argued that many crypto-Catholics still have kept their nominal Islam due to marital ties with Muslim Albanians.²⁵⁴ If their coming out happened in a public atmosphere and they were officially Catholics, the marriage opportunities would be limited for members of the family, as inter-religious marriages are still not very common in post-war Kosovo, even though they are more prevalent than before due to the secular attitude. Another factor for their refusal to convert officially is that parts of the family have lost ties with crypto-Catholic heritage. Due to the industrialization period, many people moved to another place, especially people from mountainous

²⁵⁴ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 40.

regions to the plains. Many of them have adapted to the new ambient, very often choosing one of the practices, either converting fully to Catholicism or becoming fully Muslims and losing contact with their hidden Catholic past.²⁵⁵ Due to this, one wider family may include both crypto-Catholics and fully Muslims or Catholics.

Islam in post-war Kosovo started to change its face due to the presence and work of many foreign Islamic organizations that operated in Kosovo under the umbrella of humanitarian organizations. However, their main goal was not the economic development of war-torn Kosovo, but religious influence.²⁵⁶ As due to the secularization that the society went through, most of the Kosovo Albanian Muslims did not have any knowledge about the foreign Islamic world, and after the war, these organizations among other services were also offering scholarships to Kosovar Muslims in the Islamic world, where they would come in touch with a very different approach to religion. Foreign Islamic NGOs that were operating in post-war Kosovo were also active in preaching that Kosovars were practicing a wrong and not true Islam.²⁵⁷ This caused reactions among the Islamic leaders of Kosovo, as some of them were opposing these organizations and stating that Kosovars are Muslims, and they do not need foreigners to teach them how to practice Islam.²⁵⁸

Using the socio-economic circumstances of a post-conflict society drowned in poverty, these organizations had a clear political aim on introducing radicalization of the Muslims of Kosovo in religious terms. As this was happening in post-war Kosovo, whose status was a protectorate of the UN until its declaration of independence in 2008, the Western world also has responsibility for

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Amjad Molaeb. *Kosovo's Islamic Model and its Changing Faces: The Radicalization Process that Threatens Kosovo* (New York: The New School, 2015), 33.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 35.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

allowing political Islam to establish roots in a war-torn secular society. Radicalization of Kosovar Muslims found its place through poverty, the isolation of Kosovo, and a lack of development. Political Islam in Kosovo is the child of foreign Islamic organizations and the indifference of the West to prevent such an issue in 21st century Europe.

Even though political Islam was refused by the majority of Kosovar Muslims and the numbers of such believers tend to be very small,²⁵⁹ it still affects Kosovo's society. The state of fear created among Kosovars due to the appearance of this extreme form of Islam has also affected the crypto-Catholic community to come out as such. According to Islamic laws, apostasy is punishable; thereby their conversion to Catholicism may also affect their comfort zone.

"I was born and lived in this Prishtina for my whole life, and let me tell you that before the war I never saw a woman with a hijab on the streets of Prishtina. It was not forbidden in Yugoslavia as it was in Albania, during communism I mean... You could still see in some regions of Yugoslavia women wearing hijabs, especially older women. But, after the war I do not know how it happened, but they just appeared like mushrooms after the rain. That is not the traditional Islam of Albanians. I grew up with Muslims and none of my Muslim friends was like that or thought like these new ones today... They [her friends] knew that I am not a real Muslim, they never ever cared about it. We even made jokes about it. A Muslim friend of mine said if they dig deeper in themselves, they will also find a Catholic." (Drita, 34)

The appearance of a more extreme form of Islam has also caused non crypto-Catholics to adhere more to Roman Catholicism, as they would refer to Catholic ancestry in order to distance themselves from Islam.²⁶⁰ By that means, not all conversions occurring in post-war Kosovo are

²⁵⁹ Ibid.,42-43.

²⁶⁰ Mateo Albertini. *Ndikimi i Vatikanit në konvertimin e myslimanëve në Kosovë* (Radio Kosova e Lirë, May 05, 2018).

coming from people with a crypto-Catholic heritage and tradition in their family. The questions that were raised among Kosovo Albanians about their identity and whether they belong to the East or to the West have affected also people of non-crypto-Catholic heritage to become closer to Roman Catholicism.²⁶¹ As Kosovars perceived their identity as European, namely as part of European culture and majority of Europe was Christian, remembering their Catholic ancestry was also a way to show that they are part of the European world and to gain sympathies from the West, especially during the independence struggle in the 1990s.²⁶² As Kosovars are part of Europe and they tend to integrate into the European Union, the perceptions of Islam in the Western countries as one entity and not seeing the many possible models of Islam have also contributed to some Kosovar Muslims distancing themselves even more from the religious affiliations.

Debates in the 1990s about whether Kosovar Muslims should convert massively to Catholicism were also prevalent among different circles in Kosovar society.²⁶³ Kosovo Liberation Army refused assistance or any kind of help from Islamic circles, especially foreign extremist groups.²⁶⁴ As in their ranks, they included both Catholics and Muslims, not only was their cause based on ethnic grounds, but also they craved support from Western countries and refused to get involved with the Islamic world.²⁶⁵ The KLA is important, as the narratives of state-building in post-war Kosovo usually take them as one of the main actors. The Kosovar identity as part of the West was also very prevalent in popular culture in Kosovo. In 1994, Kosovar singer Ilir Shaqiri launched a song named “I am Europe”. Among the verses of the song trying to represent Kosovo as a forgotten part of Europe, they also hint to associate Islam with the East and represent it as something that is

²⁶¹ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 101.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Henry H. Perritt. *Kosovo Liberation Army: The Inside Story of an Insurgency* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 2.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

harming the Kosovo-Albanian European identity with the following verses: “*They wanted East; they wanted Asia. Sometimes with religion, other times with tricks. My body and head to destroy they wanted, so I would not be Europe anymore.*”²⁶⁶

“I know people who are not from *laraman* families, but they are feeling closer to Catholicism nowadays. They come to masses too. They are discovering their Catholic past. When they look deeper in their background (family), they always find Catholics in their 5th, 6th or so on generation. They are slowly but surely encouraging themselves and their families to find their real identity. Especially the youth. They are educated and interested in such topics.” (Gramoz, 50)

Back then, Kosovo’s President Ibrahim Rugova, in 2003, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*, stated that he nurtures sympathies for Christianity. However, he refused to answer if he had converted officially to Catholicism, trying to avoid the question and not implying whether it was true or not.²⁶⁷ President Rugova also claimed that Christianity is the first practiced religion by Albanians and that it is very present in the Albanian culture, trying to differentiate it with Islam, which according to him arrived too late among Kosovo Albanians and it was introduced forcefully to them.²⁶⁸ He also claims that religious tolerance among Kosovo Albanians is something that has saved them from extinction and that nowadays, in freedom, they can choose whichever religion they want to be represented by.²⁶⁹ Rugova claimed that his interests for Catholicism were personal and spiritual and that his political goal was to enforce the harmony

²⁶⁶ Ilir Shaqiri. *Jam Evropë* (Onair Media, 1994).

²⁶⁷ Francesco Battistini . *Il Gandhi dei Balcani indica come sua priorità la vera tolleranza fra le confessioni diverse nella provincia serba a maggioranza albanese, Kosovo* (*Corriere della sera* November 27, 2003, p.15)

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

of religions in Kosovo.²⁷⁰ Rugova expressed that his dream was to build a temple dedicated to the Albanian Catholic Saint Mother Teresa.²⁷¹

The Cathedral of Saint Mother Teresa in the center of Pristina was inaugurated in 2010, four years after Rugova's death. Back then, Kosovo's President Fatmir Sejdiu stated the cathedral represents the values, feelings, and identity of Kosovo's people.²⁷² Even though the majority of Kosovo's capital welcomed the building of the cathedral, a small number of devoted Muslims expressed their objection due to a denied permission to build an Islamic center in Pristina, but as they stated, for a much smaller number of Catholics, a whole cathedral was built.²⁷³ The Head of the Kosovo Islamic community, Naim Ternava, has also opposed the building of a cathedral and the building of Catholic churches in areas with crypto-Catholics, and he claimed that no Catholics live in certain regions. Therefore, according to him, there was no need to build Catholic churches.²⁷⁴ But the inhabitants of the villages with the newly built Catholic churches had already expressed their interest in such objects, and parts of them have officially converted to Catholicism, as explained above.

In 2013, one of Kosovo's leading politicians, Ramush Haradinaj, a former KLA officer and later Prime Minister of Kosovo, was invited by Columbia University in New York to a public debate. There he stated his confusion about why he is a Muslim, when he never has entered a mosque in his life, and that before four generations in his family, they were Catholics.²⁷⁵ In many other

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Refki Alija. Aleksandar Vasovic. *New Cathedral Symbolises Catholic Rebirth in Kosovo* (BIRN Kosovo, 06 September, 2007).

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Fatos Bytyci. *Out of hiding, some Kosovars embrace Christianity* (Reuters, September 28, 2008).

²⁷⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ5AYX7trPk> (New York: Columbia University, 23 November, 2013).

interviews for Kosovan but also international media, Haradinaj has stated that Kosovo Albanians were just administrative Muslims due to Ottoman policies, but they have lived as Christians for longer.²⁷⁶ Even more interesting is that Haradinaj's wife, Anita Hardinaj, who supposedly comes from a Muslim family, appeared at the Global Women Summit 2019 in London wearing a cross on her necklace.

The lack of higher numbers of publicly 'coming out' crypto-Catholics in post-war Kosovo may also be attributed to a change in approach towards religion. Religion started to be perceived more as part of the personal and private sphere and less as a public identity. All of my interviewees tended to have more of a traditional relation towards the crypto-Catholic identity in terms of being part of their family, but less as a spiritual practice. Crypto-Catholics were not immune to the secular changes that occurred during socialism, and the modernization of life, as well as those changes in post-war Kosovo. All of these processes have shaped and reshaped their religious life and affected their identity. The secularization process through the modern world brought the loss of the world from religious understandings, namely, breaking up all the meta-physical myths, supernatural and sacred symbols, and bringing the attention towards the world they exist in and the time they live in.²⁷⁷ Crypto-Catholicism was perceived more as a tradition, from a historical and emotional point of view. Sometimes even a political layer was there, but I did not find any traces of deeper spiritual views towards crypto-Catholicism among my interviewees. The meaning of crypto-Catholicism for them did not include intense practices and a devoted belief towards the learnings of that religion, but their identity as such implied a more cultural heritage sense.

²⁷⁶ James Reinl. *Islam takes backseat in Kosovo politics as country pushes for EU membership* (Middle East Eye, 13 July, 2018).

²⁷⁷ Jeton Mehmeti. *Faith and Politics in Kosovo: The Status of Religious Communities in a Secular Country* (The Revival of Islam in the Balkans pp 62–80, 2015), 67-68.

“Religion is not the most important thing in life. I mean I do stuff that my family does, out of respect for the family and for our tradition that has survived for so long, but it does not affect my every-day life. If I go to church for Christmas it does not mean that I am a good person, same as the ones who go to mosque for a Friday prayer. The church cannot make you a better person. You are how you are, good or bad. Many people do everything oppositely of what their religions teach but then go to church or mosque and think they are forgiven for what they did wrong. It does not work that way. (Robert, 31).

„When my parents were alive, this (practice of religion) was a bit more prevalent. They went often to church, celebrations of holidays were of higher importance and this was still something important. My children do not have interests nowadays for this. They used to like when they were younger to color eggs for Easter, but nowadays they show no interest. I do not force this on them. It is their freedom to choose whatever life they want. It is impossible to convince them now to go to church for mass or make them say prayers before bed as my grandmother made us (him and his siblings) do it when we were their age. Not because they are afraid, but because they are really not interested in these issues. They are also young and have other priorities.” (Gjon, 47)

Crypto-Catholicism in Kosovo has survived in some communities through generations, but also the socio-political changes that have occurred in each generation have affected this practice. After the Kosovo war, in a political ambient that to a certain level was encouraging for crypto-Catholics, there is no major movement for ‘coming outs’. Even though conversions still happen nowadays in all parts of Kosovo, the majority of my interviewees did not show a big interest in it. Even if they did, conversions would be more of a symbolical act of respect due to their tradition than a spiritual or religious need. Thereby, religious affiliation has developed more into an identification of tradition than of a concrete religious practice.

Duijizings doubted the continuity of crypto-Catholicism, stating that crypto-Catholicism most probably perished after two or three generations after the conversion to Islam happened.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Ger Duijzings. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000), 84.

Duijizings focusses on the crypto-Catholicism that was outed in the 19th century, as it was the case of Stublla, and doubts that this was a lived reality for generations, especially if the conversions happened in earlier Ottoman times.²⁷⁹ My oral history research proves that crypto-Catholicism was actually inherited from the older generations of the family and that it became a lived reality for the communities. Just this lived reality changed through the generations and each of them got another shape of its manifestation.

Was there an interruption between this phenomenon, and did it get back to light only in the nineteenth century, as Duijizings claim? It is difficult to analyze, as my interviewees do not have a memory of when this phenomenon started in the family. Talking about a generation living in post-war Kosovo, they can remember mostly three generations of their family and how this was taught through the generations. Thereby, through them we cannot identify the nineteenth century, but obviously it was a family tradition to pass this practice to the next generation. But, as conversions to Islam in Kosovo were occurring constantly during the Ottoman era, some of them might have converted later than others. According to the time of their conversion and depending on the circumstances of where they were living, such as if they had accessibility to a Catholic priest from time to time or on their dynamics of contacts with the Ottoman world and introduction to Islamic teachings, they could have continued this practice without interruption. For example, if a family converted to Islam in the 19th century, their memory from their previous religious practice was still fresh by the end of the century. A village from the highlands that would convert to Islam but their introduction with the teachings of Islam or the Ottoman administration were limited due

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

to the circumstances of space; it is impossible that they started practicing Islam without knowing how to do it.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I studied the survival of crypto-Catholicism in contemporary Kosovo. As crypto-Catholicism occurred among Catholic Albanians who converted to Islam during Ottoman era, the topic of their conversion has been studied by many scholars. Even though, modern-day Albanian scholarship is divided when it comes to studying the conversion to Islam, as some prefer to represent it as forceful process through violent means, and others tend to sympathize with the theory of voluntary conversions, my research in the topic has proved that this is not a homogenous issue. Conversions to Islam in the Ottoman Empire were motivated by different factors, or sometimes forced by the authorities. They were occurring in different periods of the Ottoman era, as well as in different places. However, through the existing literature, it is clear that majority of those who converted to Islam did not do it out of their interests for the religious or spiritual teachings of Islam, but out of other interests of the time, such as gaining political rights, social status, avoiding to pay taxes, etc. Thereby, Islam was introduced to them more as a coping mechanism with the administration of the time, and less as a spiritual teaching.

Some other scholars, who tend to sympathize with the process of conversion, use the argument that conversions to Islam saved Albanians from assimilation, meaning linguistically and culturally. In my second chapter, I have argued about the ambivalence of this claim, as the converts were not preached a religion in their own language, but the new religion was also preached in other languages; thereby, that cannot be classified as rescue from assimilation. Not only the religious texts and administrative language were in other languages after conversion to Islam, but also the influence was so prevalent in every part of life, as we can see the case with literature production of the time. If we take it for granted the argument about linguistic assimilation, then clearly we could state that conversions to Islam saved them from one assimilation, but brought another one.

As conversions were highly politically and/or economically motivated, the need for belief and religious practice remained in the religion that was prevalent before the conversions. This is how crypto-Catholicism occurred in most of the cases. This phenomenon existed not only among Catholic Albanians converts to Islam, but also among many other communities who converted to Islam for similar reasons during Ottoman Empire. They followed similar patterns of how they developed their dual practice of religious tradition, even though in most of the cases, they did not even know about the existence of each other. Crypto-Catholicism was not an organized phenomenon that occurred in an organizing way arranged by a whole community. It occurred more on the individual level, meaning in the family structure, and as such it was carried from one generation to another generation.

In the last part of my second chapter, I also tried to analyze how did certain events regarding crypto-Catholics affect modern-day scholarship and popular narratives in Kosovo. The history of the persecution of crypto-Catholics from Karadag region in South-eastern Kosovo has influenced Kosovo-Albanian narratives of Ottoman time. This event is often used to describe not only the tragedy of these people, but also to emphasize the oppression of Albanians as a group in Ottoman society. It corresponds with modern-day scholarship that represents the Ottoman era as a destructive period for Albanian culture. Thereby, analyzing the responses I got from my interviews, this event gained folkloric, epic and mythological elements of martyrdom, but also of a heroism of Albanians who are represented as fearless in front of the Ottoman authorities to admit their real religious identity.

In my third chapter, firstly, I try to analyze the building of the national identity in Kosovo and the inter-religious, as well as the inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo. As Kosovo was left out of the borders of official Albania in the state-building process of 1912, ethnic identity in Kosovo played

a major role for the communities living there. The new ethnic identities replaced Ottoman religious divisions and paved the way for a political unity of Muslim and Catholic Albanians in their struggle against the Yugoslav states. Even though relations among the religious communities inside the Kosovo Albanian community were not as good, as Albanian nationalism tries to represent, ethnic differences tended to play a major role in the building of the sense of community and identity. Neither Muslim leaders, nor Catholic ones, excluded each others community from the common ethnic identity. This political atmosphere created a space for crypto-Catholics to feel balanced among both of the religious communities.

What I concluded from nine of my oral accounts with crypto-Catholics is that crypto-Catholicism in post-war Kosovo was encouraged to come to the surface by the political atmosphere that was created. In the struggle for independence from Yugoslavia, debates about the origins and belonging of Kosovo Albanians were very prevalent among Kosovan intellectual elites and this has influenced some crypto-Catholics to come out as such and reclaim their Catholic heritage. Political encouragement from main political figures of Kosovo, but also acceptance of the Catholic church in Kosovo for conversions have motivated some crypto-Catholics to convert to the religion of their ancestors. But not only, this new atmosphere has motivated also converts of non-crypto-Catholic heritage to embrace Catholicism, on the claims that this was the religion of their forefathers, even though there was no clear continuity of the heritage as in the case with crypto-Catholics.

Nevertheless, many crypto-Catholics in post-war Kosovo did not convert to Catholicism, but kept this dual practice. Actually, none of my interviewees converted officially to Catholicism. According to the material I gathered through my oral accounts, I ascribe this to a few factors that I tried to analyze in my third chapter. The main factor is the factor of secularization. The data I gathered about how crypto-Catholicism is practiced among these generations, was very different

from what they described about the practice of their older family members. The generational difference, which has influenced many in the secularization process, played a crucial role for crypto-Catholicism to take another form. Crypto-Catholicism, like any other form of religious practice, is not consistent. It is exposed to various social and political factors in Kosovo, including the secularization process. This has contributed in many of the present-day generations of crypto-Catholics to identify with this practice more in a cultural tradition term, and less in a spiritual or institutional way. This practice became the practice of the ancestors, which current-day crypto-Catholics seem to practice parts of it in order to respect their heritage.

Another factors for the lack of their official conversions, I observed, were the fear from the rise of political Islam in post-war Kosovo among certain circles, and the fear of marital isolation from the society, which still tends to be divided in religious lines when it comes to marriages. The appearance of political Islam among certain circles in post-war Kosovo represents a threat to Kosovan society, and crypto-Catholics seem to be affected by this, as they are officially Muslims. Their public apostasy of Islam might bring certain issues to them.

All of these factors have resulted in the evolution of crypto-Catholic practice in a different way from what it was like when it occurred among first or second generations of converts to Islam. In post-war Kosovo it remained more on a cultural heritage level than on a spiritual or religious level. All of my interviewees emphasized that being Albanian for them was more important than being Catholic or Muslim.

This study has helped me understand better the evolution of crypto-Catholic practice throughout the years, and how it manifested itself in contemporary Kosovo. I tried to fill the gaps in scholarship, which when studying crypto-Catholicism do not seem to take into account that crypto-

Catholicism continued as a practice even after the Ottoman era or after Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The forms were changed, as influenced by the circumstances of the time, but the practice was there, even in a form of the memory recollection.

Hopefully, this study will create more space for studying Albanian crypto-Catholic communities in other places, such as North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro or Southern Serbia. But, also the development of other crypto-religious groups that occurred during the Ottoman Empire, such as the crypto-Christians in Cyprus or crypto-Jews. The evolution of their practice and their perceptions of their religious practice might be an interesting topic for a comparative study with the crypto-Catholics of Kosovo.

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