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From Arabia to the Himalayas

Crossing Paths

In honour of Marc Gaborieau

**Studies compiled by
Véronique Bouillier and
Catherine Servan-Schreiber**

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The Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement and the Reform of Albanian Islam in the Inter-War Period

by Nathalie Clayer

In 1927, after seven years of freshly acquired independence, Albania began to stabilise and undergo political reform.¹ The ‘umbilical cord’ that used to bind the Islamic Community of this small Balkan country² with a Muslim majority to Istanbul was at that time once and for all severed. On the one hand, the setting up of national religious structures in 1923, on the other the abolition of the Caliphate and the suppression of the *medrese*’s [*Medrese* is the Turkish form of the Arabic *madrasah* — *Translator.*] in Turkey in 1924, as well as the closing of the *tekke*’s [Dervish lodges (Turkish, from Arabic) — *Translator.*] the following year, brought to an end the organic links that were in existence from a religious point of view between this former province of the Ottoman Empire and the centre on which it depended. It was at that point that the leaders of this Islamic Community received a letter from the ‘Muslim Community of India’. The latter introduced itself as having missions in England, Germany, America and Africa, as having already converted “over a hundred English people” and “about a hundred Germans” and having built mosques in England and Germany: an Islamic community which seems, therefore, to display a missionary dynamism in the very heart of Europe.

In the following years, a relationship would be established between the Albanian Islamic Community and this ‘Muslim Community of India’, or more exactly of Lahore, in this case the *Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha’at al-Islam* (‘Ahmadiyya Association for the Propagation of Islam’).³ What form did these connections take and why this influence on the part of an Indian missionary organisation among the Albanian Muslims in the Inter-War Period? It is questions such as these that this article will attempt to address.

Picture with caption: The first letter received from the Anjuman by the Albanian Islamic Community, accompanied by a photograph of the Berlin mosque

From Lahore to Tirana: propagating an Islam for the spiritual conquest of Europe

The only European country with a Muslim majority, Albania could not do otherwise than be a target of choice for a Muslim missionary organisation such as the Lahore branch of the Ahmadi movement, active in Europe since 1912. In 1927, when the representatives of the *Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha’at al-Islam* made contact with the Albanian Islamic Community, they had, indeed, already successfully established a mission at Woking, south of London,

¹ Albania acquired independence in 1913, but was occupied by various powers during the First World War. Only in 1920 did it fully recover that independence that it lost once again in 1939.

² By ‘Islamic Community’ with a capital ‘C’ I mean here the official Muslim religious institutions.

³ This denotes a branch of the Ahmadi movement, which arose in the Panjab at the end of the 19th Century. Shortly after the death of its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), this movement split into two. The greater part of the Ahmadi faithful made up the Qadiani Ahmadiyya Movement, behind the son of the founder, considering Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be a prophet. Another group, much less significant numerically and holding Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be only a reformer (*mujaddid*), constituted the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement (Smith, 1956). I shall not discuss here the activity of the Qadianis, whose impact in Albania was considerably less significant than that of the Lahoris.

some fifteen years previously. Moreover, they had just established another mission in Berlin.⁴ It was on the strength of this infrastructure and of their publications in English and German that the Assistant Secretary of the organisation, Muhammad Manzur Ilahi, entered into correspondence with the leaders of Albanian Islam and sent them some of the Lahori Ahmadi network's productions.⁵ Part of the first exchanges of letters between Lahore and Tirana was published in 1927 in the Albanian Muslim Community's journal *Zani i naltë* (The Supreme Voice). The two letters of Muhammad Manzur Ilahi thus published are quite illuminating as to the way in which the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement tried to attract the Albanian Muslim leaders and as to its intention in making this approach.

The first letter is quite short. Through its missionary activities in Europe, the *Anjuman* wishes to demonstrate that it is the promoter of a progressive Islam that "is to bring salvation from destruction by the forces of materialism". It wishes to encourage and assist the Albanian Muslims, "surrounded by enemies on all sides", to advance themselves spiritually in order to surpass these "enemies". It suggests, therefore, that they read Ahmadi literature and set the Albanian people on "the sure path to progress".⁶ In the second letter, the Assistant Secretary of the *Anjuman* more specifically requests the leadership of the Albanian Islamic Community to translate the English translation of the Koran,⁷ of which he has sent a copy, and this for "the spiritual, moral and material advancement of the Albanian people". The argument put forward by Muhammad Manzur Ilahi is that this translation lies behind a new spirit in the Muslim world, particularly among young educated Muslims, likewise an expansion of Islam in Europe. Indeed, the Islam offered to the Albanian Muslim leaders has three main characteristics. It has made it possible to respond to attacks from the enemies of Islam and above all from Christians. It can win over Europe and the Christians thanks to its spiritual power, a power that will put an end both to the political and to the economic confusions of the Muslim world. Lastly, this is a reformist Islam, adapted to modernity, which takes its stand on the Koran and seeks after the purity of the Prophet's day, setting aside the interpretations of the classical *fakih* (specialists in Muslim law), which are too much a product of their own time. This Islam, based on a comprehensible Koran, must be united, liberal and perfect.⁸

The last part of Muhammad Manzur Ilahi's letter reveals the manner in which the members of the *Anjuman* intended to operate at that time in South-Eastern Europe. Since Albania was a country with a Muslim majority and there was an Islamic Community there, they were not thinking of sending a mission, but of using this organisation as an intermediary, when asking its members to translate their works into the local language. Specifically, it had to be a local intermediary not only in relation to the Albanian Muslims but also in relation to "neighbouring countries and Christians". Two features show that, in 1927, the Lahori Ahmadi were considering the Albanian Muslim Community almost as a future Balkan branch of their missionary movement. Muhammad Manzur Ilahi, was, indeed, recommending unrealistically to the Albanian Muslim leaders that they should follow their system for raising

⁴ The *Anjuman* likewise founded a mission to Java.

⁵ It should be noted that, at about the same time, the Qadiani branch had also started to take an interest in the Albanian Muslims. Indeed, in the course of 1927, the head of the Albanian Legation in London, Eqrem bey Vlora, wrote to the Grand Mufti of Albania that the Imam of the London Mosque, Rahim Bakhsh Dard, intended to come to Albania in order to visit the country, but also for the purposes of study, the Muslims of India being interested in the Albanian Islamic Community. The diplomat added that this man had been recommended to him and that he should therefore be accorded the appropriate hospitality, so that India should have a good impression of the Islamic Community of Albania (Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit (Tirana) — henceforth AQSh — Fondi 882 (Komuniteti Mysliman), viti 1927, dosja 112). I have been unable to find any trace of this visit, assuming it indeed took place.

⁶ "Nji letër e derguem nga komuniteti mysliman të Hindit", *Zani i naltë*, IV/12, July 1927, pp. 377–378 (the letter is accompanied by a photograph of the Berlin mosque).

⁷ This refers to the translation into English, prepared by Muhammad Ali, the spiritual head of the *Anjuman* (d. 1951), and published in 1920.

⁸ "Nje leter e Komunitetit të Hindit Vllaut Hafis Isa Domni", *Zani i naltë*, V, No. 2, December 1927, pp. 425–430.

money: a system for the voluntary payment of a portion of their members' income, with the members promising to "uphold religion in the world" and to sacrifice their wealth and their time for Islam. Furthermore, since the reform had to come about through the distribution of literature, he was urging the Albanian Islamic Community to translate the *Anjuman's* books prepared in English and German, which he had sent to this end, and to distribute them free of charge.⁹

What was the outcome of this? In 1945, there was some talk of putting a young student of the Medrese of Tirana, Ismail Muçej, in charge of an 'agency' which the *Anjuman* was considering opening in Albania.¹⁰ The imposition of the communist regime did not allow it, and the Albanian Islamic Community never became a branch of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement, or its intermediary in the Balkans, in the proper sense of the term. And yet it was 'integrated' — admittedly very loosely — into the Lahori network because it regularly used to receive a variety of publications that came from Lahore and from the organisation's different missions (in England, Germany, Austria, the United States, etc). It was likewise visited by certain members of the network such as, in 1935, Baron Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels — an Austrian anthropologist who converted to Islam¹¹ — who published his impressions of the trip in the Lahore journal *The Light*.¹² Above all, up until the end of the Second World War, some Albanian Muslims were very much influenced by the *Anjuman's* teachings.

From Tirana to Lahore: from translating texts to sending students

The *Ahmadiyya Anjuman's* influence on the Albanian Islamic Community is chiefly detectable in two ways: on the one hand by the translation into Albanian of numerous texts of Lahori Ahmadi production and, on the other, by the fact that students were sent to Lahore.

From 1927, the date of the Lahoris' first contacts with Albania, up until the annexation of the country by fascist Italy in 1939, numerous articles appearing in the organ of the Albanian Islamic Community were translations or adapted translations of texts taken from Lahori Ahmadi periodicals and books. From 1927 to 1929, they were as yet relatively few in number. But from 1930 onwards, nearly all the issues of *Zani i naltë* included at least one contribution drawn, in the first instance, from the journal *The Light* of Lahore, but also from other Lahori Ahmadi periodicals: *Moslemische Revue* from Berlin, *The Islamic Review* from Woking and *Young Islam*.¹³ To these texts a number of others are to be added, prepared on the basis of translations of passages from particular Lahori Ahmadi works, such as the books by Khwaja Kamaluddin, founder of the Woking Ahmadi mission (*Table Talk*, *al-Islam* or *The Threshold of Truth*).¹⁴

Aside from these journal articles, the Albanian Islamic Community also published during 1927–1939 the translations of a booklet and a book by Muhammad Ali, the *Anjuman's*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Luli-Dizdari-Bushati 1997, p. 667.

¹¹ Baron Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels (born 1901) apparently converted to Islam at the Lahori Ahmadi mission's mosque in Berlin, around 1927. In the current literature he is said to have been attracted towards Islam while staying among the Muslims of the Balkans and Turkey and that it was a Yugoslavian imam who had suggested to him that he get in touch with the imam of the new Berlin mosque, Dr S. M. Abdullah (Khulusi 1963, pp. 234–235).

¹² Cf. *Zani i naltë*, nos. 9–10, Shtatuer–Qershuer 1935, pp. 292–296.

¹³ It should be noted that translations were similarly made from other English-language Islamic periodicals, including Qadiani Ahmadi journals like Chicago's *Moslem Sunrise* and *The Review of Religions*, or even anti-Ahmadi ones like *Genuine Islam* from Singapore (I am very grateful to Eric Germain for providing me with the publication details of these periodicals).

¹⁴ For example, in issue IX/2–3 October–November 1933, there is an article with the title 'Modern Chemistry and Islam', translated by Hasan Selami, the translation of correspondence between the Islamic Community of America and President Roosevelt, an article drawn from *The Light* on a new mosque in London, and an article by Junus Bulej on the spiritual significance of fasting, according to Dr Hamid Marcus of the Berlin mosque.

spiritual head, and of a booklet by Khwaja Kamaluddin.¹⁵ Lastly, four issues of a small journal describing itself as the Albanian-language supplement of the Lahore journal *The Light* appeared in 1936, thereby offering the Albanian public still further access — direct or indirect — to the *Anjuman*'s works.¹⁶

What was the subject matter of these texts drawn from or inspired by the Lahori Ahmadi corpus? We can distinguish four major categories. Many are concerned with the Muslim faith in general, with the personality of the Prophet and with the Holy Book of Islam, the Koran, from a reformist perspective. Others deal with the role of Islam in modern society. On this topic, two themes crop up most frequently: the condition of women and Islam's freedom from incompatibility with science, education and progress. Women do not have to be veiled. They should receive schooling. Islam does not forbid photography, the Koran may be broadcast over the radio, and Muslims need to be educated. A third group consists of texts aiming to reassert the value of Islam in relation to the West and Christianity. In these, an appeal is made to the greatness of the Muslim world during the Middle Ages, to the superiority of Muslim Spain compared with a barbarous West, or else to brotherhood in Islam. Positive appreciations of Islam by Christians and other non-Muslims are adduced, and above all the conversion of Europeans. Islam's worldwide numerical strength is underscored by way of statistical tables, and more precise facts are given about the Islamic communities of Europe, Japan and America. To this group should be added texts that reassert the value not only of Islam, but also of religion in general, in opposition to materialism and atheism. Lastly, the fourth category is that of the texts that more specifically concern the Ahmadiyya Movement, its missions and their activities, with the emphasis on the expansion of Islam in Europe.

In order to gauge the *Anjuman*'s influence, it is also interesting to enquire into the translators of these texts. For that, it is necessary to draw a distinction between two periods. Between 1927 and 1931, the Ahmadi texts are translated by two people in the main: the Administrative Director and lecturer at the Medrese of Tirana, Junus Bulej,¹⁷ who generally translated from German and, from 1929 onwards, the young Professor of Mathematics and Chemistry at the American Technical College in Tirana, Omer (or Ymer) M. Sharra,¹⁸ who translated from English.¹⁹ No ulema were involved, therefore. One can assume that they had been more or less appointed to translate the Ahmadi texts by members of the leadership of the Islamic Community. But, being a teacher at the Medrese, Junus Bulej seems to have had his imitators among the students, all the more so as it became, in the 1930's, part of the education of the religious authorities-to-be trained in that establishment to use and to translate Ahmadi literature.

Following the 1929 Congress, the Albanian Islamic Community and its institutions were indeed reformed, particularly the Medrese of Tirana, which became the sole establishment for Muslim religious education in the country, under the name 'Medrese

¹⁵ Muhamet Ali, *Një përshkrim i shkurtër i jetës së profetit t'islamizmës* (trans. Omer M. Sharra), Shkodër, 'Ora e Shkodrës', 1929, 74 pp.; Muhamet Ali, *Muhamedi profeti i ynë*, Shkodër, 'Ora e Shkodrës', 1931, 247 pp.; and *Disa të vërteta morale* (trans. Sh. Putra), Tirana, 'Tirana', 1939, 45 pp. It is possible that the booklet entitled *Islamizmi*, published by the Islamic Community in 1929, is also translated from an Ahmadi text. I have not been able to check this. In addition, it is necessary to point out that there were, in 1935 and 1938, two translations of works by Ömer Rıza Doğrul, a Turkish author himself steeped in Ahmadi texts, who translated the translation of the Koran prepared by Muhammad Ali (cf. Uzun, 1994 on this individual).

¹⁶ On this periodical, see below.

¹⁷ On Junus Bulej (1892–1966), originally from Shkodra, cf. Luli-Dizdari-Bushati 1997, pp. 399–414.

¹⁸ On Ymer Sharra (1901–1975), who was born in Vlora (in South-West Albania), see Gogaj 1999, p. 54.

¹⁹ According to the United States reissue of the book Muhamet Ali, *Një përshkrim i shkurtër i jetës së profetit t'islamizmës*, translated by Omer M. Sharra, which Imam Vehbi Ismaili has made available to me, Omer Sharra was at that time Professor of English at the Medrese of Tirana. I am immensely grateful to Imam Vehbi Ismail, who was kind enough to reply to my queries and send me publications.

General' (*Medrese e përgjithshme*). As for the journal *Zani i naltë*, after two long interruptions of seven and nine months in 1929 and 1930–1931 due to the reorganisation of the Community and a new law on the press, it also took on a new appearance, with a new editor, Haki Sharofi, in charge. In addition, it was decided to allow the Medrese's students to express themselves through it "in order to convey to public opinion some idea of the way in which future Muslim religious professionals were being educated".²⁰ Now the greater part of the articles supplied from then on by the students were translations of texts taken from Ahmadi periodicals. It should be stressed here that, in the Medrese General's new curriculum, English had replaced French, a western foreign language taught at the Medrese of Tirana prior to 1929.²¹ This change is no coincidence. It was due to the desire on the part of the Muslim Community's leaders to give their future functionaries a chance to have access to a body of work like that of the *Anjuman*.²² In 1932, five students from the Medrese trained in translation and in this way supplied the organ of the Islamic Community with texts. By 1939 there were over fifteen of them,²³ amongst whom was Hasan Selami, who, after graduating in 1935, ran the English classes at the Medrese for several years before leaving to pursue his studies in Cairo.²⁴

Following the annexation of the country by Italy, *Zani i naltë* was replaced by the journal *Kultura islame* (Islamic Culture). The Italian occupation seems to have led the publishers of the new organ of the Islamic Community to discontinue making direct references to Ahmadi journals or at any rate to discontinue offering plain translations made by the students of the Medrese.²⁵ Yet the influence of the *Anjuman* did not disappear, since, alongside the translations of the Egyptian modernist authors who made their appearance at that time,²⁶ translations of articles or extracts from Ahmadi books are still to be found in *Kultura islame*, as well as references to Muhammad Ali and his disciples. Besides, a letter from the Honorary Secretary of the *Anjuman*, Aziz Bakhsh, is published in the issue for September–October 1940. The latter fact definitely indicates that the correspondence that the Albanian Islamic Community had maintained with the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement was still continuing.²⁷ The Ahmadi corpus also becomes more in evidence again in 1943–1944, after the Italian occupation had ended, when the ensuing German occupation seems to have allowed more freedom to the leaders of Albanian Islam. Some students of the Medrese, such as Ismail Muçej, also went back to publishing articles based on material provided by the

²⁰ *Zani i naltë*, VI/2, Tetuer 1931, p. 66.

²¹ Cf. *Rregulore e Medreses së Përgjithshme të Komunitetit Mysliman Shqiptar*, Shkodër, Ora e Shkodrës, 1931.

²² Henceforth, in fact, the Medrese of Tirana constituted an exception in the Balkans, since French and German remained the only western languages taught in establishments of this type down to the Second World War (Popovic 1997). Attention is drawn to this change of foreign language at the Medrese of Tirana and the reason for it by Sherif Putra, an Albanian student at Lahore, in an article published in *The Light* ('Islam in Albania', *The Light*, vol. XIII, no. 5, 1/2/1935, p. 2). I owe my knowledge of this article to Mr Nasir Ahmad of Lahore, to whom I am immensely grateful.

²³ I have listed seventeen names of students having made translations. Some of them used the signature 'Devrani', the pseudonym of a person whose status is not at present known to me.

²⁴ Hasan Selami died in Cairo in 1944 (cf. Ismaili 1993, p. 169, and *Kultura islame*, V/11, korrik 1944, pp. 316–322).

²⁵ For example, in issue 1/4, pp. 143–146, one article had been explicitly compiled from the *Moslemische Revue*.

²⁶ In this way there were published in serial form translations of Taha Husayn's 'Guides to Thought' and Muhammad Haykal's 'Life of Muhammad'.

²⁷ This letter, dated 13th May 1940, was a reply to a telegram of 27th April 1940, sent to the *Anjuman* by Behxet Shapati, the Head of the Albanian Islamic Community, on the occasion of the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet (cf. *Kultura Islame*, II/13–14, shtator–tetor 1940, p. 50).

Anjuman.²⁸ In 1944, the Islamic Community even republished a series of religious books, one of these being the translation of the booklet by Muhammad Ali on the life of the Prophet.

The continuation of Ahmadi influence in the Albanian Islamic Community's publications is not surprising, inasmuch as the managing editor of *Kultura islame*, Sadik Bega, was a young graduate of the Medrese who, in his time, had himself translated articles from Ahmadi journals. Above all, the journal's editor, Sherif Putra, also a graduate of the Medrese and author of a very large number of translations of Ahmadi texts, was a former scholarship holder of the *Anjuman* in Lahore.²⁹

For the propagation of Islam in its Lahori Ahmadiyya interpretation was not limited to passing on its literary productions in the Albanian language. The attraction of the *Anjuman* was strong enough also to prompt several young Albanian Muslims to go and undertake advanced theological studies in India. According to the reports of the Director of the Medrese, the *Anjuman* had offered scholarships and young Albanians wanted to take advantage of them. This happened first of all with two out of the ten first graduates of the Medrese, Sherif Putra and Ejup Fazli Kraja, who had started working for the Islamic Community on leaving the Medrese in October 1932. After many difficulties, due in particular to having to meet their travel expenses, for which no provision had been made either by the *Anjuman* or by the Albanian Islamic Community, they finally got under way for the Indies at the end of the year 1934. They were joined by Halil Junus Repishti, scion of a well-known family of traders and ulema from Shkodra. It should be noted that the latter had not studied at the Medrese of Tirana, but in the religious establishments of his native city. Ahmadi influence had succeeded, then, in emerging to some degree from the context of the *Medrese e Përgjithshme*.³⁰ Finally, three other graduates of the Medrese left for the Indies in 1935. Yet it seems they never arrived. Reaching Cairo, one stage on their long voyage, they would have been prevented from carrying on.³¹

As a result, Lahore only received, all told, three Albanian students. They took courses there notably in Arabic, the history of Islam, *hadith*, English and Urdu. Ejup Kraja, in particular, entered the University of the Punjab, [This is the University of the Punjab, Lahore, now in Pakistan — *Translator*.] where, in 1937, he took courses in the 'Arts and Philosophy' department. In 1936, all three of them published the aforementioned Albanian-language supplement of the journal *The Light*, which ceased publication after four issues for lack of resources. Housed, fed and clothed by the *Anjuman*, which also used to provide them with the books it published, Sherif Putra and his two friends seem, in spite of everything, to have had a great deal of trouble getting hold of other books and maintaining a decent standard of living in Lahore. In order to help them, the Albanian Islamic Community made several appeals for funds.³² We do not know whether or not these difficult conditions underlay the return of the three students to Albania after having spent three years in the Indies. On the 1st of March 1939, Halil Repishti and Ejup Kraja were, indeed, repatriated.³³ In fact, both of them quickly set off again for Egypt, since in October 1939 they were excluded from al-Azhar on account of their Ahmadi beliefs.³⁴ In 1940, when they were studying at the American University in Cairo and were given a grant by the Albanian Islamic Community, they published in an

²⁸ Luli-Dizdari-Bushati 1997, pp. 666–667.

²⁹ The Head of the Albanian Islamic Community, Behxet Shapati, who was the author of numerous articles in the journal, also seems to have been familiar with Ahmadi literature.

³⁰ According to Imam Vehbi Ismaili, Halil Junus Repishti and Ejup Kraja were friends.

³¹ Cf. F. 882, v. 1934, d. 78, report dated 20/4/1935; F. 882, v. 1935, d. 2, report dated 1/5/1935; and *Zani i naltë*, XI/3, marc 1936, back cover.

³² Cf. for example 'Për të gatue nji kler të ri', *Zani i naltë*, X/11, Nanduer 1935, pp. 348–351.

³³ AQSh, F. 882, v. 1939, d. 52.

³⁴ *Oriente Moderno*, XIX, 1939, p. 619.

Egyptian newspaper a declaration in which they acknowledged their mistake and the deviance of Ahmadi doctrines.³⁵ As for Sherif Putra, he also went back to Albania, at the latest during 1939, since in September he became editor there of the Islamic Community's new publication.

Picture with caption: Sherif Putra became editor of the Community's journal on his return from Lahore

The search for a 'modern', 'European' Islam and its limitations

Why did the leaders of Albanian Islam and the young executives whom they had begun to educate turn towards Lahore and the *Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at al-Islam*? Let us go back over the Albanian situation in order to understand these links forged with an Indian Islam. When, in 1927, the *Anjuman* made contact with the Albanian Islamic Community, a debate over the reform of Islam and Islamic institutions was getting underway in Albania. At the centre of this discussion, which covered the pages of the Community's publication, was Salih Vuçitern, Director General of Vakfs (the Islamic Community's properties in mortmain).³⁶ Very close to President Ahmed Zogu, back in position again as Head of State since the end of the year 1924, and true intermediary between the political authorities and the Islamic Community, Salih Vuçitern made an appeal at that time directed towards the "need for reform". In it, he was suggesting a reorganisation of the vakfs, the closure of unnecessary mosques, the suppression of the regional *medrese*'s and their replacement by two boarding schools, at Shkodra and at Tirana, where a modern religious education would be provided. He was motivated in this by the fact that the Albanian Muslims were "surrounded on all sides by cultured peoples" and that the only means of survival, under these conditions, was to raise the standards of Albanian society.³⁷ Of course, this move should be placed in the wider context of the politics of the reforms carried out by Ahmed Zogu, all the more so as Salih Vuçitern, an admirer, moreover, of Atatürk, was one of his close advisers. This policy led notably to the introduction of the civil code in 1928, the reorganisation of religious Communities in 1929, with the aim of state control, and the abolition of wearing the veil in 1937.

The aid that the *Anjuman* offered for the purpose of "the spiritual advancement of Albanian Muslims", of setting them on "the road to progress", and of causing them to "surpass their enemies" corresponded exactly, then, to the process that Salih Vuçitern wanted to set in motion. Is it any wonder, then, that it was he who, in 1928, only one year, therefore, after the first contacts with the Ahmadiyya Movement, made an appeal for funds in each prefecture in order to publish a number of books and distribute them free of charge, including *Muhammed — Our Prophet* by Muhammad Ali, adopting, therefore, an approach close to the one suggested by the Assistant Secretary of the *Anjuman*?³⁸ Three years later, when the book

³⁵ Cf. AQSh, F. 882, v. 1939, d. 95, and *Oriente Moderno*, XX, 1940, p. 460.

³⁶ Born in 1880 at Vuçitern (in Kosovo), Salih Vuçitern had undertaken theological and secondary school education in Istanbul. Arriving in Albania at the time of the Balkan wars (1912–1913), he was notably Inspector of Education in the Mat region in 1919 and Prefect of Dibra in 1922. In 1921, he was Director General of Vakfs, a post that he occupied until 1939, then once more from 1942 onwards. He was a Deputy from 1921 to 1925 and from 1928 to 1932, and a Senator from 1925 to 1928. From 1928 to 1930, he was Minister of Public Works. During the 1930's, he was in charge of the administration of agricultural reform. In 1938, he was president of SITA, the Electricity Society of Tirana. During the Italian occupation, he was interned for two and a half years. A Zog loyalist and member of the militant movement supporting his restoration, he was arrested in October 1945 by the communist authorities and died in prison four years later (cf. Taylor 1937, p. 1146; Schmidt-Neke 1987, p. 355; Vllamasi 1995, see Index).

³⁷ 'Deklaratë. Mbi nevojën e reformave', *Zani i natës*, IV/7, Fruer 1927, p. 196–207.

³⁸ The process was repeated in 1944, on the same lines (cf. *Kultura islame*, V/7–8, Mars–Prillë 1944, p. 204).

by Muhammad Ali came out, a member of the Islamic Community was confirming that this translation had been made on the initiative of Salih Vuçitern, with his desire for reform, “in order to rescue the Albanian Muslims from the swamps of age-old apathy in which they are immersed”, in order to “advance them from the religious point of view and from the national point of view by means of culture”. Isa Domni added, in a spirit probably quite close to Salih Vuçitern’s: “To set up a *medrese* in every corner of Albania, to build mosques everywhere achieves nothing and can be of no use without culturally shaping the intellect and transforming the spirit of Muslims by means of good advice, a good education, and with the help of high-quality literature, written or translated according to need”.³⁹

The Islam of the *Ahmadiyya Anjuman* corresponded, then, to this Islam compatible with modernity, science and rationality of which Salih Vuçitern and some of his colleagues were in search. This was actually an Islam advocated by several reformist groups of the Muslim world of the time.⁴⁰ What probably also attracted the Albanian Muslim leaders in the Lahori Ahmadi arguments was, paradoxically, the European side of this missionary movement — not its Indian side. One of the central ingredients in Albanian nation building had been, since the final years of Ottoman rule, the building of a ‘European’ Albanian Muslim identity, as opposed to an ‘Asian’ Turkish Muslim identity, in order to legitimise the wish of Albanian Muslims not to emigrate to Anatolia in the event of the Empire’s demise. What is more, as in the other Balkan countries, modernisation was synonymous with de-ottomanisation and europeanisation. Since the country had a Muslim majority, Albanian reformers like Salih Vuçitern accordingly wanted to create an Islam compatible with Europe. Now, the Lahori Ahmadi were trying to propagate a European Islam in Western Europe, drawing even western intellectuals into their ranks.⁴¹

Another aspect of the *Anjuman*’s arguments must also have been right on target: the ‘arsenal’ that it had been able to develop in response to Islam’s loss of prestige among educated Muslims on the one hand and in response to the onslaughts of Christian propaganda on the other. For Salih Vuçitern and the leaders of Albanian Islam were up against these two problems. The most educated Muslims, under the influence of scientism and Kemalism, tended to reject Islam as responsible for the backwardness of the country and incompatible with progress. The Bektashi Muslims, being affiliated with that brotherhood of the most heterodox and syncretistic kind, were the first to denounce Sunni Islam as incapable of reforming itself and as an impediment to progress and modernity.⁴² As for the Christians, some had even aimed to reconvert the Albanian Muslims to the “religion of their ancestors”.⁴³

In answer to the challenges of modernity, science, reason and Europeanness, the *Anjuman* was offering a body of work in western languages (English and German), readily translatable into Albanian. Albanian literature — religious and non-religious — was as yet only in its early stages. Knowledge of Arabic was relatively limited, above all on the part of the most reform-minded, and Turkish Islam, to which Albanian Islam had been tied, was in the throes of Mustafa Kemal’s reforms. In the same way, for the advanced theological studies

³⁹ ‘Pak fjalë rreth nji libri’, *Zani i naltë*, VI/2, Tetuer 1931, pp. 62–65.

⁴⁰ On this subject, see Dupont and Mayeur-Jaouen 2002.

⁴¹ That is the way Sherif Putra, for example, was looking at it when he said: “I assure the Anjuman that though it has for the present students from one European country only, that is, Albania, yet within a short time it will have many students from different parts of Europe, because the European Muslims look to this Anjuman for the spreading of Islam. They believe that if there is any body who can save Islam from these crises, it is the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, Lahore” (*The Light*, XIII, no. 5, 1/1/1935, p. 2).

⁴² See especially the polemic pitting Mehdi Frashëri, an intellectual and Albanian political figure of Bektashi origin, against the Islamic Community (*Zani i naltë*, V/10–11, gusht–stator 1928, pp. 678–690 and dheter 1928, pp. 726–734).

⁴³ See, for example, C. T. Erickson, ‘Albania, the Key to the Moslem World’, *The Moslem World* 1914, 4, pp. 115–119, and ‘La questione religiosa in Albania’, *Roma e l’Oriente*, VI/34/1913, pp. 199–208.

that the Islamic Community was itself unable to set up, there was the problem of choosing where the graduates of the Medrese should go. There was no longer any possibility of going to Istanbul, the former educational centre of the Albanian ulema under the Ottoman Empire. Since 1925, provision had been made for sending young people to al-Azhar.⁴⁴ In 1940, they amounted to about twenty students in Cairo from Albania.⁴⁵ The contacts established with the Ahmadiyya Movement offered an alternative to the Egyptian capital that was credible enough, it appears, during the first half of the 1930's, before the second contingent of students was stopped at Cairo.

This latter incident and the relatively insignificant number of students who did indeed pursue their studies in Lahore should lead us to wonder about the actual influence of the *Anjuman* in Albania. The Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement exercised a direct influence on three main circles: the leaders of Albanian Islam who, like Salih Vuçitern, were part of the reformist current; all or some of the students of the Medrese of Tirana, enthusiastic readers and translators of the literary output of the *Anjuman*'s network; and lastly a few other Muslims, following the example of the young Halil Repishti of Shkodra, who went off to study in Lahore. We may also judge that it had an indirect influence on wider Muslim circles, particularly among the readers of the Islamic Community's publication. Indeed, the use of texts from the Lahori Ahmadi corpus gave a very specific profile to Albanian Islamic journals. As compared with the journal of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia, for example, *Zani i naltë* and *Kultura islame* had a much more significant cultural dimension, allotting less space to the religious sciences. Even so, one should not overestimate this journalistic influence. The distribution of the Islamic Community's journals remained limited. In 1939, the number of subscribers to the journal *Zani i naltë* amounted to a little over two hundred, and half of them lived in the Albanian capital.⁴⁶ In 1941 *Kultura islame*, run by a young duo consisting of Sadik Bega and Sherif Putra, would have had 2,400 subscribers.⁴⁷ Proselytism of the Lahori Ahmadi variety, backed up by written material, suited educated youth and intellectuals, but not the masses, still very largely unlettered in Albania at this time and supervised by a 'clergy' of a very poor standard.⁴⁸

More fundamentally, if the impact of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement remained limited, it is above all because the reformist Muslim tendency using the Ahmadi 'arsenal' was, in fact, very much a minority within the Albanian Muslim population and its élite. At the time the journal *Drita* appeared, published by the three Albanian students in Lahore, the publishers of *Zani i naltë* were announcing "a new Islamic spirit". But they foresaw that the publication was going to be fought against on two fronts, by the 'conservatives' and by the 'non-religious', since it was created for the nationalists who had understood that the progress of the Albanian nation would only come about when the Muslim section of the population had developed to an appropriate degree.⁴⁹ In fact, a significant section of the Muslim élite, Bektashis and non-Bektashis, was more modernist than reformist, in the sense that this term has in the history of Islam in the 19th–20th centuries, and had difficulty seeing how (Sunni) Islam could be compatible with modernity, as we have seen.

But the reformist Muslim tendency was also in conflict with conservative Muslim circles, including a large section of the ulema and minor religious functionaries (imams,

⁴⁴ *Zani i naltë*, II/4, qershor–korrik 1925, p. 487.

⁴⁵ Some graduates of the Medrese of Tirana studied not at al-Azhar but at the University of Cairo, following the example of Sadik Bega, a graduate of the Faculty of Arts [French, 'la faculté des Lettres' — *Translator*].

⁴⁶ AQSh, F. 882, v. 1939, d. 90.

⁴⁷ AQSh, F. 882, v. 1941, d. 15.

⁴⁸ In 1939, the editors of *Kultura islame* received a letter which drew attention to the discrepancy between the journal's content and the reality of Islam in the Albanian countryside (AQSh, F. 882, v. 1939, d. 119, f. 16–17).

⁴⁹ 'Nji revistë shqipe në Lahorë', *Zani i naltë*, XI/3, Mars 1936, pp. 99–100.

muezzins). When Salih Vuçitern called for reform in 1927, reactions were not slow in coming. The same thing happened when the regional *medrese*'s were suppressed or when the abolition of wearing the veil was decreed in 1937. The most virulent reactions came from Shkodra, the metropolis of northern Albania, bastion of Muslim traditionalism.⁵⁰ Even so, it is likely that the reformist tendency that monopolised the machinery of the Islamic Community was out of step not only with the religious folk of Shkodra, but also with those of other parts of the country. This opposition can be gauged by an announcement made by the editors of *Zani i naltë* in 1933. According to them, the journal was not the mouthpiece of the ulema, but of the Islamic Community, that is, the organisation representing the Muslim sector of the population. They added that there were no clergy in Islam and that the aim of the journal was not to defend the hojas and form a parasitic clique living off the general public, but to contribute to the nation's cultural, social and economic development according to the precepts of the Koran.⁵¹

Beyond this struggle for legitimacy between reformists and traditionalist ulema, there could be the problem of the Ahmadiyya Movement's image in the Muslim world. Outside the country, we have seen that it had been possible for the Albanian Muslims' connections with the *Anjuman* to turn problematic. At Cairo, in 1935, three students had been unable to continue their journey to Lahore. Four years later, two others were expelled from al-Azhar and had to renounce their Ahmadi beliefs. It should be noted that these incidents did not stop the Albanian Islamic Community publishing another letter from the *Anjuman* in its periodical publication in 1940. Yet this same publication, in 1936, had echoed a reaction from the Albanian Muslim community itself. A reader was denouncing the deviant views of Lahore's young Albanian students, who, in their journal *Drita*, had written that Joseph was the father of Jesus. And he concluded: "this defamatory doctrine coming from the Islamic movement in Lahore has been contradicted by all the competent scholars in the Muslim world. We want our students to bring us culture and not a defamatory doctrine that is against the Koran".⁵² Already in 1933, a doubt did exist in some minds since two young Muslims from Shkodra appear to have taken the trouble to write to the Sheikh of al-Azhar to ask him what view to take of the Ahmadiyya movement.⁵³ Should one also see in this critical approach a reflection of the fact that the Albanian Islamic Community did not have the translation of the Koran by Muhammad Ali translated into Albanian? Did those ulema capable of carrying out such a translation refuse to make use of this controversial text? The question remains open.⁵⁴

The definitive obstacle seen by the Albanian reformists to the propagation of Lahori Ahmadi Islam was the imposition of the communist regime at the end of the Second World War. In 1945, the new authorities intercepted the last parcel of books sent by the *Anjuman* to the young Ismail Muçej and advised, that is to say, enjoined the latter — charged by the Indians with opening an agency in Albania — to break off his correspondence with Lahore.

⁵⁰ On reactions to the reform project launched by Salih Vuçitern in 1927, cf. *Zani i naltë* (year 1927), and on reactions to the abolition of wearing the veil in 1937, see Morozzo della Rocca 1990, pp. 35–36.

⁵¹ 'Detyra jonë', *Zani i naltë*, nos. 2–3, tetuer–nanduer 1933, pp. 16–19. In the article in *The Light* cited in notes 22 and 41, Sherif Putra came out very strongly against the Mullas and 'mullaism'.

⁵² 'Si u kriju Krishti?', *Zani i naltë*, nos. 10–11, tetuer–nanduer 1936, p. 351.

⁵³ Cf. Luli-Dizdari-Bushati 1997, pp. 585–586.

⁵⁴ Let us recall that, on the other hand, the translation by Muhammad Ali was translated into Turkish in 1934 (cf. *supra*, note 15), and that this Turkish translation formed the basis of a translation into Serbo-Croat published in Sarajevo in 1937 by M. Pandža and Dž. Čaušević (Popovic 1973). According to Fethi Mehdiu (1996, p. 99), one Shejh Jahja, son of Shejh Shefqet of Djakovica (Kosovo), had made a translation of the Koran into Albanian on the basis of the translation of Pandža and Čaušević and that of Karabeg. But this translation remained in manuscript. In Albania, Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu, who applied himself to a translation-commentary of the Koran in the 1930's, used other works. He points out, however, that he has taken "Indian Muslim scholars" as a model when he gives the verses in transcription for those who are unfamiliar with the Arabic script (Bardhi 1998, p. 128).

Subsequently, Albanian Islam was brought to heel, the country was practically closed off and, in 1967, all forms of religion were forbidden there until 1991.

Yet Lahori Ahmadi influence continued to make itself felt among some Albanian Muslims, not in Albania itself, but in the United States. One of the main representatives of these is Imam Vehbi Ismaili. The author of numerous translations of articles from journals of the Lahori network when he was a student of the Medrese during 1936–1937, then a student at al-Azhar from 1938 onwards, Vehbi Ismaili (or Vehbi Hoxha) is, indeed, behind numerous publications appearing in Albanian from the 1950's onwards on American soil, in which elements of Lahori Ahmadi thought can be directly or indirectly detected.⁵⁵ And one could follow the continuing impact of the Lahori missionary activity of the inter-war period down to our own time, because, since the fall of communism in Albania, the publications of Vehbi Ismaili have been distributed in the country. These include, for example, the book 'Islam and the Prayers' (*Islamizmi dhe lutjet*), which the author says he wrote under the particular inspiration of the books of Muhammad Ali and Khwaja Kamaluddin.⁵⁶

To return to the inter-war period, Albanian-Indian contacts are far from having been marginal in the transformations of Albanian Islam. They should be placed at the heart of a process of political and religious reform driven from the top, whose promoters, following the example of Salih Vuçitern, wanted to make Albania "a European country and the most advanced Muslim state".⁵⁷ One could see a paradox in the fact that this reformist group looking for a western Islam turned towards the East. But that would be to forget that, although Indian, the *Anjuman* was then at the heart of Islam's first phases of expansion in Western Europe.

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⁵⁵ On Vehbi and his activity, cf. Luli-Dizdari-Bushati 1997, pp. 595–624.

⁵⁶ Ismaili, 1993 (see the two Prefaces).

⁵⁷ According to relatives of Salih Vuçitern interviewed in Shkodra in June 1995.

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