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**Narrating Albanianism.
Primordialist and Perennialist Themes in Albanian
Historiography¹**

Nationalism, nation and national narrative

It is widely accepted that Nationalism is an extensive, world-wide spread ideology that creates, reproduces and preserves nations. Nationalism, being one of the components of the modern world, is a feature of modernity and not older periods of history. Nationalism as an ideology has shaped modern common sense. The common sense we have about nationhood, nation, homeland and nationalism itself, as well as the psychology of national ties must be considered as products of Nationalism and placed within the historicity of Nationalism.²

This common sense includes a series of assumptions (considered self-evident) about what the nation, nationality and homeland is. About the fact that the world is composed of nations and divided between nations. About the fact that people who speak a common language have common roots and therefore deserve to have their own independent state. About the fact that “We” are autochthonous while “They” have come to “our” territories, “our” lands, so they have to leave where they came from. About the fact that the “Albanian” will never become “Greek” or vice versa. About the fact that the national identity is and should be the most important of all other identities one might have. About the fact that the religion of Albanians is “Albanianism,” etc. This common sense is an integral part of nationhood and plays an important role in the process of the social construction of the nation.

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2. Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995), 16.

Nationalism as an ideology, however, has also affected the ways we study nation and Nationalism itself. It is quite difficult to ignore these assumptions or ways of thinking, or not to be affected by common sense practices that derive from the fact that “we” live in a national environment, in a nation-state, and that the world consists of other nations, of “others” who like “us” live in “their own” nation states. There is a tendency to take the nation for granted, as something natural. This trend is present not only in our daily interactions, but in Social Sciences and Humanities Studies as well. Social Sciences tend to consider nation as a given unit of analysis. In this way, the image of a world composed of nations and divided between nations is naturalized and the nation state is presented as the natural political and social form of the modern world. This is what different scholars have named “methodological nationalism”³ that is, in simple terms, the tendency of social sciences to equate the nation-state with society.⁴ Social sciences perceive and analyze social phenomena around the boundaries of the nation-state, and this creates a set of obstacles in order to capture some important social interactions. The structure and content of the major Social Sciences has been linked to and shaped by the historic experience of the creation of modern nation-states. Main Social Sciences such as Sociology, Economics, Anthropology, International Relations etc. were constructed according to the principles of the nation states.⁵ The concept of the nation was considered such ordinary such banal (in Michael Billig’s words) as to disappear from the lens of the scientific research. History in the twentieth century was also written as history of particular nation states or as history of relations between nation states. By taking national stereotypes, national discourses and themes and sometimes even national myths for granted, history has contributed in the process of naturalizing the nation and the image of a world divided between nations.

3. Among others: Herminio Martins, “Time and theory in sociology,” in *Approaches to Sociology*, ed. John Rex (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974). Daniel Chernilo, “The critique of methodological nationalism: Theory and history,” *Thesis Eleven* 106, no. 1 (2011): 98-2011. Alex Sager, “Methodological nationalism, migration and political theory,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (November 2014), doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12167.

4. Daniel Chernilo, *A social theory of the nation state. The political forms of modernity beyond methodological nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 9.

5. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences,” *Global network* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301-334.

National historians when producing or reproducing national histories, speak of nations with unique languages, customs and traditions. Each nation has a distinct past, present and future, “its own” separate symbols and a single name. National histories present nation as something almost eternal, its roots are to be found in a distant and glorious past. National history as a narrative follows the rules of narrative discourse,⁶ it must have a beginning, a plot and a continuity. National histories talk about “Us.” “Us,” who are unique, who descend from the ancient “Greeks” or “Illyrians” or “Celts” and so on.

This uniqueness, however, is not unique because the world is made up of other nations, which in turn are unique as well. The national “Us” does not include only one national, unique community. It is precisely this “blend of universality and peculiarity that allows nations to proclaim themselves as nations.”⁷ If the nation is an imagined community⁸ than “the homeland,” every “homeland,” should also be imagined, “our” and “others” as well. We cannot imagine our own nation without the imagination of other similar communities. There is no “Us” without “Them.”

The historical national narrative chooses to deal with some elements of the past and chooses to neglect others. This reflects the dialectic relationship located at the heart of Nationalism, the relationship between memory and amnesia.⁹ The nation, has a collective amnesia just like it has a collective memory. This means that collective memory is always selective and therefore some not so flattering parts of “our” national history must be forgotten. The national narrative follows a selective path as well.

The nation, the national identity, the imagination of the homeland, are constructed (although not exclusively) through these selective historical national narratives. However, official nationalist narrative re-

6. Homi K Bhabha, “DisemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation,” in *Narrating the nation*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 291-323.

7. Billig, *Banal nationalism*, 16.

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised edition* (UK: Verso, 2006).

9. Ernest Gellner, *Έθνη και εθνικισμός* (Athens: Alexandria, 1992), 108; Billig, *Banal nationalism*, 37-43.

flects balances of hegemony, therefore national narratives are continually subject to change.¹⁰ In this sense the nation itself, the national identity and the imagination of the homeland, are always subject to change.

Albanian historiography between primordialism and perennialism

In recent years efforts have been made in order to review some periods and subjects of the Albanian history that traditionally have been presented through a nationalistic narrative,¹¹ however, the dominant discourse remains the nationalist one. The official Albanian historiography offers a “glorified” explanatory scheme¹² of the reasons for the emergence of the Albanian nationalism using terms such as “national re-birth,” “revival of the nation,” or “awakening of the nation,” which resemble the terms used by nationalists or primordialist scholars of Nationalism.¹³ The period 1830-1912 is called “National Revival” and the most important nationalists of the era are called “Renaissance men” (Rilindas).

10. Ibid.

11. Bernd Fischer states: “The traditional narrative accepted by most Albanian scholars, as well as some prominent western scholars of Albanian topics, was a narrative of struggle to free Albania from the oppressors which included all neighbors but concentrated particularly on the Ottomans who took control of Albanian lands beginning in the 15th century. Some more nationalist minded historians suggest that the struggle for freedom and independence dates as far back as 15th century, the era of the Albanian national hero Skanderbeg and progressed in linear fashion from that day. ...the more extreme official histories, particularly those from the socialist period which are still often repeated today, argue that substantial popular gatherings supported the nationalists/patriots and that on the eve of the Balkan Wars, a vast movement demanding independence arose across Albania, demonstrating the remarkable level of political maturity, the masses had achieved.” Bernd Fischer, “Albanian nationalism and Albanian independence,” *SEEU Review Special Edition*, Volume 10, Issue 1 (2014): 25-26.

12. Regarding the subject of the simplistic explanation of Albanian historiography on issues related to Albanian Nationalism and the relation between Communism and Nationalism during the Enver Hoxha regime, a very interesting scientific article is: Jonilda Rrapaj and Klevis Kolasi, “The curious case of Albanian Nationalism: the crooked line from a scattered array of clans to a nation state,” in *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, Volume 43 (2013): 185-228.

13. Ernest Gellner states that the nationalist ideologist claims that nations exist by the very nature of things and they simply wait for them to wake them up. Gellner, *Εθνη και εθνικισμός*, 93.

Influenced by the “national-communist” ideology, Albanian history during the period 1945-1990 is analyzed in a dogmatic way.¹⁴ However even during the post-communist period, it seems that little has changed in the way in which Albanian historiography addresses themes related to Albanian nationalism.¹⁵ In 2002, the Academy of Sciences of Albania, the most important scientific and intellectual institution in the country, published the first two volumes of the four-volume project “History of the Albanian People.” In 2007 and 2008, the other two volumes were published. It is basically a re-publishing the earlier editions of the “History of Albania” published in 1959 and 1965. The new version avoids the Marxist approach of history but fails to avoid the nationalist approach. The title of the book has changed from “History of Albania” to “History of the Albanian People,” but the primordialist and perennialist approach to issues related with nation and Nationalism prevails.

The themes of common origin, territory and language¹⁶ related to the primordialist approach of Nationalism and the theme of the historical continuity of the nation¹⁷ related to perennialism, are widely present in the first two volumes. The common origin is the central theme of primordialism. Perennialism, also, supports the idea that ethnic community is a basic, timeless feature of human society throughout the recorded history and that the present nations are the result of an historical process and have developed over the centuries, therefore they are present in the Middle Ages and the Antiquity as well.¹⁸ Primordialism is

14. Robert Elsie, “Albania, a Modern History,” review of *Albania, a Modern History*, by Miranda Vickers, February 3, 1999 <<http://www.elsie.de/pdf/reviews/-R1999VickersAlbania.pdf>>. Robert Elsie, *Historical dictionary of Albania* (UK: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2010), 11.

15. Fatos Lubonja, “Mbi nevojën e dekonstruktimit të miteve” (The need for the deconstruction of the myths), *Përpyjekja*, Year VI, no. 15-16, (1999): 5. This edition of the Review “Përpyjekja includes all papers presented at the Scientific Conference on “The Role of Myth in History and Development of Albania,” London, June 1999. Some of these papers were published in the book by Stephanie Schwander-Sievers and Bernd Fischer (eds.), *Albanian Identities. Myth and history* (UK: C. Hurst & CO Publishers, 2002).

16. Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking nationalism. A critical introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 20.

17. Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 159.

18. Umut Ozkirimli, *Θεωρίες του εθνικισμού. Μία κριτική προσέγγιση* (Athens: Sideris, 2013), 100.

based primarily on the concept of ethnicity and secondly on the notion of nationalism. The first is extended to the second. Primordialists consider ethnicity central to the understanding of Nationalism. Nationalism is seen as a later evolution of earlier ethnic processes. Perennialism is a less extreme approach which emphasizes on the historicity and continuity of the nation. The modern character of Nationalism is not questioned, but on the other hand the nations are considered as a continuation of ethnicity that has been present in all periods of human history. So, the emphasis is placed on the historicity of ethnic and national ties, and not necessarily at their naturalness.¹⁹

According to official Albanian historiography, the Albanian nation, is the natural descendant of the Illyrians therefore, the history of the Albanian people begins with the Illyrians. The first part of the first volume of the “History of the Albanian People” is entitled “The Illyrians.” According to Muzafer Korkuti, the theories of the Illyrian origin express two views: “According to the first view, Illyrians have come to the Balkan Peninsula, according to the second they are an autochthonous population formed in the historic land of Illyria.” Then he follows: “the theories that Illyrians have come and are not autochthonous to the Balkan Peninsula have inconsistencies,” while the other theories “consider the Illyrian culture as a phenomenon that has historically been formed in the Illyrian territory through a long and uninterrupted process.” He argues that “archaeological research over the last 50 years in Albania shows that Illyrian ethnicity should not be linked to the coming of populations from the northern Balkans but as a long and complex autochthonous process.”²⁰

The modernist approach of Nationalism rejects these perennial themes and considers nations as social and historical constructions, emphasizing on the modernity of nations and Nationalism.²¹ However, in the “History of the Albanian people” the historical continuity of the nation is presented as a natural phenomenon. This is suggested not only

19. Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 159.

20. Skender Anamali and Kristaq Prifti (eds.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar. V.1. Ilirët, mesjeta, Shqipëria nën Perandorinë Osmane gjatë shek.XVI vitet 20 të shek.XIX* (The history of the Albanian people. V.1. The Illyrians, the Middle ages, Albania under the Ottoman Empire rule through XVI century-first 20 years of the XIX Century) (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave, TOENA, 2002), 40-41.

21. Ozkirimli, *Θεωρίες του εθνικισμού*, 119-121.

by the content of the book but by its structure also. The book begins with the Neolithic period and continues with the Illyrians, their origin, their territories and their language. Then the book deals with the Illyrian states. It devotes a chapter to Epirus and the Epirote League to continue with the Illyrian wars and the Kingdom of Dardania. The second part concerns the Middle Ages. The writers use the terms “Albania” and “Albanians” to describe what they earlier described as “Illyria” and “Illyrians.” The first sub-chapter of the second part is entitled “Albania in the Byzantine Empire” with the subtitle “Albania and Byzantium.” From this point the terms “Albania” and “Albanian” are used in the headings of chapters and subchapters. The theme of the historical continuity of the nation prevails and this seems to be clear by the use of the term “Illyrian-Albanian lands,” used in the second part of the first volume to describe a vast geographical area, but also by the use of the term “Illyrian-Albanians” to describe the inhabitants of these areas. The term “Illyrian -Albanian territories” is used along with the term “Albanian territories” only on some pages related to the period from 395 BC to 500 AD.²²

Later on, the terms “Albanian territories,” “Albanian coasts,” “Albania” and so on are used. At about the same time, the inhabitants of these areas are called “Illyrian-Albanians” and terms such as “Illyrian-Albanian origin,” “autochthonous Illyrian-Albanian populations,” “Illyrian-Albanian groups” are used.²³

The perennial theme that nations develop organically from a pre-existing ethnic background²⁴ prevails. When analyzing the “structure of the Albanian space in the Middle Ages” it is stated that: “From the seventh to the eighth century, the ethnic situation in the Balkans has stabilized.” In the same chapter the writers refer to Albania as the “medieval homeland of the Albanians.”²⁵ The idea of the natural expansion and transformation of ethnicity into a nation is present not only in this book, but it characterizes the Albanian historiography in general. Kristo Frashëri is considered one of the most important Albanian historians.

22. Anamali and Prifti (eds.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar* (The history of the Albanian people), 199-205.

23. *Ibid.*, 527-565, 206.

24. Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking nationalism. A critical introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 20.

25. Anamali and Prifti (eds.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar* (The history of the Albanian people), 202, 207.

His book “Etnogjeneza e shqiptarëve. Vështrim historik” begins with the following phrase: “Just like it happens with individuals, nations are interested in knowing where they come from, who were their ancestors, where and when they lived, what were their values and so on. This is because every nation, whether ancient or medieval, has its genetic ancestors, of which it has inherited the territory, the language, the material and the spiritual culture, and in some cases the name too.”²⁶ It is widely suggested by the Albanian historiography that nations create Nationalism and not vice versa.²⁷ This position is strongly rejected by modernists who consider that it is Nationalism that creates nations.

Albanian historiography analyzes and describes the past in glorious and glamorous ways using terms and criteria belonging to the era of Nationalism to describe phenomena of earlier times.²⁸ A characteristic example is sub-chapter 4 of the fifth chapter entitled “International relations of Albania in the period of Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbej (1443-1468),” which analyzes “Albania's international relations with the states of Southeastern Europe.”²⁹

Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbej is the central figure around which “the mythology of Albanian nationalism” was constructed,³⁰ Skenderbej’s “mythology” was reinforced by Albanian writers and poets during the first phase of the Albanian nationalism and continued throughout the existence of the Albanian state. Fatos Lubonja states that the fact that

26. Kristo Frashëri, *Etnogjeneza e shqiptarëve. Vështrim historik* (The ethnogenesis of the Albanians. Historic overview) (Tiranë: Botime M&B, 2013), 9.

27. “The Albanian National Revival was linked to a higher level of development of the Albanian nation, with its consolidation, which led to the creation of a new movement in terms of its content and its aims, of Nationalism...” Anamali and Prifti (eds.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar* (The history of the Albanian people), 18.

28. According to Fatos Lubonja “The history that the Albanians have learned and continue to learn, according to the official national-communist historiography of the time of Enver Hoxha, analyzes the important historical periods in a glorious way. The Illyrian period: their culture is compared to its evolution with the Greek civilization. The middle Ages are considered a period of blossoming of the Albanian culture. The Ottoman invasion is considered as the main cause of regression. The National Awakening is considered as a great effort to liberate from Turkey and recover the lost European identity. Independence is seen as the result of a battle that Albanians gave...” Lubonja, “Mbi nevojën e dekonstruktimit të miteve” (The need for the deconstruction of the myths), 5.

29. Anamali and Prifti (eds.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar* (The history of the Albanian people), 438.

30. Schwander-Sievers and Fischer, *Albanian Identities*, 92.

Skenderbej had changed several times his religion (from a Christian he became a Muslim and then again a Christian) matched the “historical construction” created by one of the most important Albanian nationalists, Pashko Vasa, who in his most famous poem wrote the verse: “Do not look at churches and mosques/The Albanian religion is Albanianism.”³¹ This remains to date the motto of Albanian nationalism.

It goes without saying that Albanian historiography contributed to this effort. In recent years attempts have been made in order to analyze the period of Skenderbej and Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbej himself from a more critical, more realistic perspective.³² However, any attempt to deconstruct myths of the Albanian historiography provokes a reaction from the majority of Albanian historians and the public opinion.³³

During the communist period, Albanian historiography was based upon nationalist concepts such as the “Albanian national movement” or

31. Cecilie Endresen challenges this perception that has become an integral part of the dominant public discourse in Albania. Through interviews with the religious leaders of the four religious communities of Albania, also through the analysis of the newspapers, books and periodicals of these communities, Endresen demonstrates the fluidity and complexity of the relation between nation and religion in the case of Albania. Cecilie Endresen, *Is the Albanian's religion really "Albanianism"? Religion and nation according to Muslim and Christian leaders in Albania* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012). Also Cecilie Endresen, “Faith, Fatherland, or both? Accommodationist and neo-fundamentalist Islamic discourses in Albania,” in *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans. From Identity to Religiosity*, eds. Olivier Roy and Arolda Elbasani (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

32. Oliver Schmitt, *Skënderbeu* (Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese Fjala, 2014).

33. Kristo Frashëri published a book in order to oppose Schmitt's findings. The title of the book is *Skenderbej deformed by a Swiss historian and some Albanian analysts*. Frashëri explains the reasons why he wrote such a book them in the first pages: “After 1990, many books have been published for Skenderbej by foreign writers. Their content has not caused any reactions from Albanian public opinion. That's because the writers have taken the same steps followed by the Albanian historiography. Each of them notes the historical value of Skenderbej –as a national hero who guided his homeland in a liberating war against the Ottoman conquerors– an important leader who, besides the war, was the first who created a central Albanian state... On the contrary, the Swiss historian doesn't follow this path and presents us a different Skenderbej.” Kristo Frashëri, *Skënderbeu i shpërfytyruar nga një historian zviceran dhe nga disa analistë shqiptarë: vështrim kritik* (Skenderbej deformed by a Swiss historian and some Albanian analysts: critical review) (Tiranë: Dudaj, 2009), 14.

the “Albanian national consciousness.”³⁴ The nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth century was simply associated and paradoxically reinforced by the concept of class struggle. The structural changes of the early 1990s disassociated historiography from the ideological weight of Marxism. This ideological vacuum, however, was quickly filled by the ideology of Nationalism. Different periods of the Albanian history (especially those associated with the rise of the Albanian nationalism and the formation of the Albanian nation) continue to be described in glorious terms. An extract from the “History of the Albanian People Volume II” is descriptive: “The changes that took place during the (national) Revival brought the reinforcement of the Albanian national consciousness, expressed in their awareness of their joint affiliation to a common ethnic group, to a common nation, a nation that lived in a common territory, which had common origin, language, values, history, and which was different from the others. These characteristics had gained stability as a result of the eternal resistance of the Albanian people against foreign invasions especially the Ottomans. These characteristics were preserved and inherited by Albanians during the Revival era.”³⁵

Reading this extract, it seems that even the terms “ethnic group” (ethnie) and “nation” are used as synonyms. There is a confusion in the Albanian terminology of nationalism. In addition to the terms “ethnie” (etni) and “nation” (komb), the term etnos is often used. This term is used to describe the primitive societies which existed before the formation of “ethnic groups.” However, this is not always clear³⁶ and these two terms etnos and etni (ethnic group), but also komb (nation) or kombësi (ethnicity) are sometimes used almost as synonyms, which increases confusion. Kristo Frashëri, and other Albanian historians as well, often uses these terms, even in the same sentence, without any distinction: “... the population that inhabited the Illyrian territories was

34. Nathalie Clayer, N. *Në fillimet e nacionalizmit shqiptar. Lindja e një kombi me shumicë myslimane në Evropë* (The origins of Albanian nationalism: birth of a predominantly Muslim nation in Europe) (Tiranë: Botimet Përprojekta, 2012), 12.

35. Anamali and Prifti, *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, 19.

36. Muzafer Korkuti claims that: “...the concept of civilization is broadly the same with the concept of etnos... We believe that in the Chalcolithic and the Bronze Era the degree of harmonization between culture and etnos is almost absolute and therefore a common cultural group is the same as a common ethnic group.” Muzafer Korkuti, *Parailirët, ilirët, arbërit: histori e shkurtër* (Proto Illyrians, Illyrians, Arbers: Short history) (Tiranë: Toena, 2003), 5.

divided into two major social groups: the free inhabitants belonging to the Illyrian ethnos and the slaves, who belonged to non-Illyrian nationalities (kombësi)...”³⁷

Conclusions

Albanian historiography continues to analyze different parts of the “national history” from a nationalistic perspective. This is something that has not changed in comparison to the period of Real Socialism. Based on the primordialist and perennialist tradition, the nation is considered an organic part of human society, but also its historicity and continuity, is being emphasized. That is why the emergence of the Albanian nation is not considered as “birth” but as “rebirth” as the “re-awakening” the “revival” of something that existed before, but it was in lethargy.

Albanian historiography continues to operate between these two approaches, during the period of Real Socialism and in the post-1990s period as well. The nation is taken for granted and its existence is not questioned. The existence of “other” nations is taken for granted as well. As we mentioned in the above section, the existence of a nation, every nation presupposes the existence of other nations. Even for the most extreme of nationalists, the nation exists in a world made up of nations. Albanian historiography offers us a view of the past which resembles the modern world, a world of nations. By taking the existence of the nation for granted, the image of a world composed of nations and divided between nations is naturalized.

The continuity of the nation is one the most important themes of the Albanian historiography. As mentioned above, themes of “national revival,” “re-awakening of the nation,” “Albanian renaissance men” are widely treated by Albanian historiography during the post Real Socialism period. These terms are not accidental nor innocent. Terms never are. Someone must have fallen into lethargy in order to “re-awake.” Someone must have died in order to be “re-born.” However, in both cases it is taken for granted that the nation has existed before the era when the “Albanian renaissance men” chose to wake it up, to bring it back to life.

Concepts such as “language,” “dialect,” “homeland,” “sanctity of the nation,” “national sovereignty,” “territory,” “national interest,” are deeply

37. Frashëri, *Etnogjeneza e shqiptarëve*, 200.

integrated into the common sense of nationhood. In order to analyze issues related to Nationalism, nation and national identity, historiography needs the use of these concepts. However, such issues are taken for granted by the Albanian historiography, as if they do not need more detailed analysis, as if any reader would not need further clarification. Of course this is not the task of historiography *per se*, but the fact that in all the editions we analyzed we haven't found the slightest effort to clarify any concept, supports Billig's position that "with the triumph of Nationalism and the establishment of nations across the globe, the theories of Nationalism have been transformed into familiar common sense."³⁸ The readers should know that nations have continuity, that they originate from ancestors who have lived in the same territories for thousands of years, that they have spoken the same language as "We" do today, that "They" are not autochthonous but have come from elsewhere to "our territories" and so on.

38. Billig, *Banal nationalism*, 63.