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ORIENTALISM, ISLAM AND THE ALBANIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This article examines the intertwined histories of Orientalism and Islam with particular attention to the Albanian intellectual tradition. Drawing on Edward Said's foundational critique of Orientalist discourse, the study traces four major phases in the Christian and European engagement with Islam: early Eastern Christian polemics, medieval Catholic-directed scholarship, colonial-era orientalist production, and the more self-critical scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within each phase, the paper identifies the specific ways in which Albanian Christian clergy, Ottoman-era Muslim writers, and post-Enlightenment Albanian intellectuals positioned themselves relative to the broader Orientalist field. The analysis reveals that Albanian engagements with the "Orient" were never simply derivative of European paradigms: they were simultaneously shaped by confessional loyalties, Ottoman imperial belonging, nationalist aspirations, and Sufi spiritual frameworks. By recovering the voices of Albanian scholars—from Pjetër Budi and Pjetër Bogdani to Naim Frashëri and the founders of the Oriental Studies chair in Prishtina—the article contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize the historiography of Islamic studies and to foreground peripheral yet significant intellectual traditions.

Keywords: *Orientalism; Islam; Albanian intellectual history; colonialism; Ottoman literature; Sufism*

1. Introduction

Orientalism—as a corpus of scholarly practice, cultural imagination, and ideological apparatus—has long occupied a contested place within the humanities and social sciences. Since Edward Said's landmark 1978 intervention, scholars

have been compelled to inquire not only the content of Orientalist knowledge but also the structural conditions that made such knowledge possible and, crucially, desirable to those who produced it. Said's central thesis—that the "Orient" was, in large measure, a European invention, a site of romantic projection, frozen otherness, and imperial legibility—has reshaped entire disciplines while simultaneously provoking sustained critique from scholars who find it overextended, reductive, or insufficiently attentive to internal diversity within both Orientalism and the societies it purported to describe (Said, 1978, p. 23).

Yet the debate over Orientalism has, by and large, been conducted within the intellectual frameworks of Western Europe and the Arab world. Smaller or peripheral traditions—including those of the Albanian-speaking world—have received comparatively little attention in this broader conversation, despite the fact that they offer singularly complex vantage points. Albanians occupied a unique historical position: a predominantly Muslim majority emerging from Ottoman rule, a Christian minority with deep ties to Rome and Constantinople, and a nationalist intelligentsia that sought to construct a secular, European-facing identity while drawing selectively on both Eastern and Western cultural resources.

This article addresses that lacuna by situating the Albanian encounter with Orientalism within a comparative framework. It pursues two principal aims: first, to reconstruct the four major phases through which Christian and European scholarship approached Islam, paying particular attention to the methodological and ideological transformations that distinguish each period; and second, to trace how Albanian intellectuals—clergy, Sufi poets, secular nationalists, and academic orientalists—inhabited, reproduced, subverted, or transcended these frameworks across several centuries. In doing so, the study argues that the Albanian case is not merely an appendage to an European story but a distinctive node in a genuinely transnational intellectual history.

2. Conceptualizing Orientalism: Definitions, Debates and Periodizations

The term "Orientalism" carries multiple semantic layers that must be distinguished before a meaningful analysis can proceed. In the most neutral academic usage, it denotes the scholarly study of Eastern languages, cultures, and civilizations—a sense preserved in university department names and reflected

in the German Orientalistik and the French *études orientales*. In its more charged, post-Saidian usage, however, "Orientalism" designates a discourse in which the asymmetry of power between Europe and the East is reproduced, naturalized, and disguised as objective scholarship (Said, 1978, p. 23). It is in this second sense that the concept carries critical force, pointing to the ways in which scholarly institutions—journals, chairs, learned societies, encyclopaedias—functioned simultaneously as instruments of colonial governance and as producers of a specifically European self-image.

The earliest challenge to the self-presentation of Orientalism as disinterested science came from Anouar Abdel Malek's 1963 article "L'orientalisme en crise," which argued that classical Orientalist scholarship systematically froze and essentialized its objects of study, denying Eastern peoples historical agency and internal dynamism (Abdel Malek, 1963, pp. 109–142). Francesco Gabrieli's rebuttal, "Apologie de l'orientalisme," offered a vigorous defence of the European tradition while acknowledging some of its limitations (Gabrieli, 1965, pp. 134–142). This polemical exchange established the terms of the debate that Said would synthesize and amplify fifteen years later.

Within Muslim scholarly circles, the response to Orientalism has been equally divided. Some contemporary Muslim scholars trained in Western academies have acknowledged the genuine philological and historical achievements of the Orientalist tradition; others have viewed its output with deep suspicion, seeing in it an instrument of ideological subjugation (Smajlović, n.d., pp. 119–153; es-Sibai, 2003, pp. 5–10). This internal debate within Islamic scholarship is itself an evidence of the complex reception history of Orientalism—a history that cannot be reduced to a simple binary of Western domination and Eastern resistance.

For the purposes of this article, the history of Christian and European scholarship on Islam is periodized into four analytically distinct phases:

(1) early contact between Muslims and Eastern Christians;

(2) medieval Catholic-directed polemic and translation;

(3) colonial-era academic Orientalism; and

(4) the self-critical, pluralist scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Each phase produced distinctive institutional forms, rhetorical strategies, and—crucially—distinct positions on the nature of Muhammad and the validity of Islamic revelation.

3. Four Phases of Christian and European Engagement with Islam

3.1 Early Eastern Christian Encounters

The earliest recorded Christian engagement with Islam emerged within decades of the Muslim conquests of Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia (633–659 CE)—regions characterized by sophisticated Greek- and Syriac-speaking Christian communities. The intellectual climate of these communities was marked by ongoing doctrinal disputes, and Islam entered their horizon not as a neutral phenomenon requiring dispassionate analysis but as a theological problem demanding an apologetic response.

John of Damascus (c. 655–749), revered as a Doctor of the Universal Church, produced the most influential early Christian treatment of Islam. In his *Fount of Knowledge* and *De Haeresibus*, he characterized Islam as a heresy rather than a new religion, depicted the Prophet Muhammad as a false prophet who had absorbed elements of both the Old and New Testaments through contact with an Arian monk named Bahira, and dismissed Muslim devotion as idolatry directed towards the planet Venus, which Arabs allegedly called Hubar (Silajdžić, 2015, pp. 40–46). These accusations—fabrication, heresy, carnal excess—would prove extraordinarily durable, providing the paradigm through which subsequent Western writers interpreted Islam for centuries.

Jacobite and Nestorian authors also engaged with Islam in this period. The bishop of Takrit, Habib ibn Hidma (known as Abu Raita), produced apologetic treatises defending Christian doctrine before a Muslim audience; similarly, the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I entered into a theological dialogue with Caliph al-Mahdi, presenting Christian fundamentals alongside their Islamic analogues (Cheikho, 1923, pp. 1–26). Byzantine polemicists—Bartholomew of Edessa, Nicetas of Byzantium, and Manuel II Palaeologus—continued this tradition through the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, consistently portraying Muhammad as a demonically inspired impostor and Islam as a distortion of biblical revelation (Marković, 1995, pp. 13–55).

Significantly, no Albanian-origin author from this early period has been identified as engaging systematically with Islam or Muhammad. The mental frameworks elaborated during these centuries would, however, inform subsequent Albanian Christian writing once the Ottoman state arrived on Albanian soil.

3.2 Medieval Catholic Scholarship: Translation, Polemic, and Crusade

Between tenth to fifteenth centuries, the Western Latin encounter with Islam assumed new institutional forms, shaped by the specific dynamics of the Crusading movement, the Reconquista, and the translation movement centred in Toledo and Palermo. Robert Caspar identifies three distinct currents within this period (Caspar, 1987, pp. 76–77).

The first was a movement of genuine cultural exchange, through which the scientific and philosophical inheritance of the Islamic world—medicine, mathematics, astronomy, Aristotelian philosophy—was transmitted into Latin through the collaborative work of translators in Toledo, Burgos, Naples, and Sicily. This *translatio studiorum* fundamentally transformed European intellectual life, stimulating the scholastic florescence of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Sezgin, 2010). The magnitude of this debt to Islamic science has been systematically reconstructed by the contemporary historian of science Fuat Sezgin, whose multi-volume study has demonstrated the depth of Islamic contributions to world civilization far beyond the parameters acknowledged in standard Eurocentric historiographies.

The second current was the production of popular legend and theological caricature, driven by the ideological demands of the Crusading enterprise. Absurd myths about Muhammad proliferated in clerical writing; Peter the Venerable of Cluny commissioned the first Latin translation of the Quran in 1143 precisely so that it could be refuted (Nawwab, 2002, p. 124). The translation, produced by Robert of Ketton, was widely acknowledged to deviate significantly from the original and yet served as the basis for further European translations for five centuries. Raymond Lull's thirteenth-century project of training missionaries in Arabic and Islamic theology similarly subordinated linguistic and cultural knowledge to the aim of confuting Islamic claims (Nawwab, 2002, pp. 124–125).

The third current, more seldomly acknowledged, was a strand of apologetic and irenic engagement that recognized the need to understand Islam on its own terms as a precondition for meaningful dialogue. It is this minority tradition—exemplified by figures such as John of Segovia in the fifteenth century—that anticipates the more generous scholarly orientations of later centuries.

Albanian Christian writing of the early modern period largely reproduced the polemical framework of the Latin West, though inflected by the specific

political context of Ottoman rule. Pjetër Budi (1566–1622), born in the region of Mat and author of four devotional works in Albanian, consistently depicted Ottoman power and Islamic teaching in negative terms, situating Albanian suffering within a providentialist narrative of Christian martyrdom (Elsie, 2001, pp. 41–47). Frang Bardhi (1606–1643), author of the *Dictionarium Latino Epiroticum* (1635) and a prolific correspondent of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome, furnished Rome with detailed intelligence on diocesan conditions, political developments, and Albanian customs—a form of ecclesiastical Orientalism shaped by missionary imperatives (Elsie, 2001, p. 49).

The most significant Albanian Catholic intellectual of the period, Pjetër Bogdani (1630–1689), author of *Çeta e profetëve (The Band of Prophets),* developed his anti-Islamic argument in direct engagement with the broader Jesuit and Dominican tradition of learned polemic. His encounter with Cardinal Gregorio Barbarigo (1622–1697) in Padua—a bishop who had established a multilingual press for Eastern Christian purposes and maintained scholarly interest in Oriental cultures, including Albanian—illustrates the complex intersection of missionary enterprise, humanist philology, and political calculation that characterized Catholic Orientalism in this period. After returning to the Balkans in 1686, Bogdani lent his organizational capacities to the military resistance against the Ottoman Empire in Kosovo, perishing in the epidemic that followed the Habsburg withdrawal (Elsie, 2001, pp. 52–61).

Simultaneously, and in stark contrast, Albanian Muslims from the same period were producing literary output in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian—languages that positioned them not as observers of an alien civilization but as active participants within it. Figures such as Mevlana Atai of Skopje, Jahja Bej Dukagjini (d. 1575), known in Turkish as Dukaginzade Yahya Bey, and numerous others composed verse in the classical mesnevi form, celebrating Islamic values and—in Jahja Beyjs masterpiece *Shah-u geda (The King and the Beggar)*—exploring the Sufi metaphysics of divine love through allegory. This literary corpus constitutes a distinctively Albanian contribution to the broader Ottoman Islamic cultural tradition and stands as a powerful corrective to narratives that treat all Albanian engagement with Islam as purely passive or externally imposed (Izeti, 2004, p. 206).

3.3 Colonial-Era Orientalism: Knowledge, Power, and the Institutionalization of the Field

The consolidation of academic Orientalism as an institutional field occurred in tandem with the expansion of European colonial power, particularly during the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. The establishment of Oriental Studies chairs—first in France, then in England and the German states—reflected the practical needs of colonial administration (commercial negotiation, legal translation, intelligence gathering) as well as more diffuse cultural interests in the "exotic" East. The symbiosis between Orientalist scholarship and colonial power reached its most visible expression in Napoleon's Egyptian expedition (1798–1801), which deployed an accompanying commission of scientists and scholars as part of a project of comprehensive territorial and epistemic appropriation.

Said's analysis of this period remains the most influential account of how Orientalist knowledge functioned as a technology of power—filtering the East through a grid of European categories, representing it as static, irrational, and governable, and thereby producing the legitimating conditions for colonial domination (Said, 1978). While subsequent scholars have qualified this account—pointing to the genuine achievements of philological Orientalism, the diversity of orientalist motivations, and the ways in which Eastern scholars actively participated in the production of "Oriental" knowledge on their own terms—the basic insight that knowledge and power were structurally intertwined in this period retains considerable analytical force.

Among the genuine scholarly contributions of this era must be counted the editing and publication of major Islamic source texts: Carl Tornberg's edition of Ibn Athir's al-Kamil fi'l-Tarikh, *Eduard Sachau's edition of Ibn Sa'd's Tabaqat*, and the multi-volume *History of al-Tabari* all represent enduring contributions to Islamic historiography, however problematic the broader institutional context in which they were produced.

In the Albanian literary sphere, this period corresponds to the remarkable flourishing of the Bejtexhinj tradition—Albanian poetry written in the Arabic script and saturated with Islamic themes. Figures such as Nezim Frakulla, Muhamed Çami Kyçyku, Muçi Zade, Ali Ulqinaku, Mulla Hysein Dobraçi, Tahir Gjakova, and Shejh Mala produced a body of verse that simultaneously engaged with Islamic devotional and mystical conventions and addressed the social realities of Albanian-speaking communities (Izeti, 2004, p. 208). This

tradition culminated, in a complex and philosophically sophisticated way, in the work of Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), whose literary output drew on Bektashi Sufi philosophy to construct a vision of Albanian national identity that was at once Islamic and universalist, Eastern and European.

3.4 Critical and Pluralist Orientalism: Towards a Post-Colonial Islamic Studies

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a significant reorientation within Western academic approaches to Islam, driven partly by the delegitimization of colonialism, partly by the impact of Said's critique, and partly by the emergence of scholars who combined rigorous philological training with genuine openness to Islamic intellectual traditions on their own terms. Figures such as Louis Massignon, Georges Anawati, Montgomery Watt, Henri Corbin, Annemarie Schimmel, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Martin Lings approached Islamic civilization with a combination of scholarly rigour and sympathetic imagination that represented a decisive break from the dismissive or polemical registers of earlier Orientalism.

Albert Hourani's observation in 1992 that Said's *Orientalism* had rendered the neutral use of the term virtually impossible captures the seismic effect of that text on the self-understanding of the discipline (Said, 1978). The consequence was not the disappearance of Oriental Studies but its reconstitution under new names—Islamic studies, Middle Eastern studies, Near Eastern studies—and, crucially, with a heightened reflexivity about the political and epistemological assumptions underlying scholarly practice.

4. Albanian Orientalism in the Modern Period

The institutionalization of Oriental Studies in Albanian-speaking territories began in earnest in the second half of the twentieth century. The foundational moment was the establishment of the Chair of Oriental Studies at the University of Prishtina in 1973 by Dr. Hasan Kaleshi (1922–1976), a scholar of exceptional range who was trained in both Eastern and Western academic traditions. Kaleshi's contribution—which included the cataloguing of Ottoman-era manuscripts in Yugoslav archives and the pioneering study of Albanian contributions to Ottoman literature—established the disciplinary infrastructure for subsequent generations of scholars.

Prior to institutionalization, individual scholars had made significant contributions to the elucidation of Islamic and Oriental questions in Albanian.

Hafiz Ali Korça, Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu, Ferid Vokopola, Sadik Bega, Sherif Putra, Vexhi Buharaja, and Osman Myderrizi each produced work that, while varying in quality and methodological sophistication, collectively demonstrated that the Albanian intellectual tradition contained the resources for a self-directed engagement with Islamic learning.

Enis Sulstarova's analysis of Albanian Orientalism in the post-Naim period identifies a distinctive pattern: the selective appropriation of an Oriental heritage in the service of a nationalist narrative that simultaneously claimed European belonging (Sulstarova, as cited in the original paper). This double movement—acknowledging the Ottoman Islamic past while distancing the Albanian nation from it through a narrative of forced conversion and essential European-ness—represents a specific form of what Said would call the "Orientalizing of the Orient": the internalization of an external gaze that renders one's own history legible only through borrowed categories.

The establishment of the Oriental Philology program at the University of Tetova in 2012 marks the most recent chapter in this institutional history. The program's second-cycle offerings, which include original research on significant Oriental manuscripts and the translation of key texts into Albanian, represent an ongoing effort to mediate between the Albanian public and a cultural inheritance that remains, for many, inaccessible in its original languages.

5. Conclusion

The history of Orientalism and its Albanian reception offers a series of instructive complications to any simple narrative about the relationship between knowledge and power in the study of Islam. Albanian intellectuals were neither passive recipients of European Orientalist categories nor entirely immune to their shaping influence. They produced scholarship, poetry, theology, and institutional infrastructure that reflected the distinctive pressures of their historical situation: Catholic missionary culture, Ottoman imperial belonging, Sufi spiritual formation, and nationalist ideology all left their marks on how Albanians read, wrote about, and lived within the Islamic tradition.

At the same time, the Albanian case confirms the broader argument that Orientalism was never a monolithic or uniformly hegemonic discourse. It was contested from within European scholarship (Abdel Malek, Massignon, Schimmel) and from without (Said, Smajlović). Its institutional expressions—

translation projects, academic chairs, manuscript catalogues—were susceptible to appropriation by subaltern scholars who turned its tools toward ends their European founders had not envisioned. The ongoing project of Albanian Oriental Studies, from Kaleshi to the present, is a testament to this possibility.

Future research might profitably examine the specific manuscript traditions preserved in Albanian archives, the reception of Sufi literature in contemporary Albanian religious life, and the comparative position of Albanian Orientalism within the broader context of post-Yugoslav and post-Ottoman intellectual history. Such inquiries would not only enrich the historiography of Islamic studies but contribute to the decolonization of a scholarly field that still bears the marks of its foundational entanglements.

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