



Pilgrimages in mountains in Kosovo

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Summary - The pilgrimages in mountains in Kosovo are still present, however, ancient beliefs related to mountains are almost abandoned and replaced by contemporary knowledge and practices, such as environmentalism, hiking, climbing, camping, and the like. The pilgrimages take place during the month of August, though in Lybeten it lasts only one day, whereas the one in Pashtrik lasts almost three weeks. As the peaks of these mountains are border areas in both cases, participants also come from neighbouring countries: in Lybeten from Macedonia, while in Pashtrik from Albania. The main difference between these two pilgrimages is that the one in Lybeten is spontaneous and unorganized, with a very relaxing atmosphere, whereas the one in Pashtrik is more organized and institutionalised. In addition to the pilgrimages, there are the myths, legends and interesting stories related to these mountains. With their unique appearance, these two mountains form a stunning and magnificent landscapes. Ultimately, these mountains add more value to the spiritual and natural heritage of Kosovo.

Keywords: pilgrimages / Albania / Kosovo / Sharr Mountains / Pashtrik

Riassunto - La frequentazione delle montagne kossovere a scopo di pellegrinaggio è ancora praticata anche se viene oggi progressivamente abbandonata e sostituita da pratiche contemporanee come ad esempio l'ambientalismo, l'escursionismo, l'arrampicata, il campeggio, e simili. I pellegrinaggi sono fatti durante il mese di agosto, tuttavia, in Lybeten dura solo un giorno, mentre quello di Pashtrik dura quasi tre settimane. Poiché le cime di queste montagne rappresentano le zone di confine in entrambi i casi, i partecipanti provengono anche dai paesi vicini: in Lybeten da Macedonia, mentre in Pashtrik dall'Albania. Il pellegrinaggio di Lybeten è spontaneo e non organizzato, con un'atmosfera molto rilassante, mentre questo in Pashtrik è per lo più organizzato e istituzionalizzato. Le due montagne sono circondate da miti, leggende e storie interessanti, oltre a garantire paesaggi mozzafiato e magnifici. In ultima analisi, queste montagne aggiungono più valore al patrimonio spirituale e naturale del Kosovo.

Parole chiave: pellegrinaggi / Albania / Kosovo / Monti Sharr / Pashtrik

INTRODUCTION

On all of its four sides, Kosovo is surrounded by high mountains.¹ Two of these are pilgrimage sites. One is Lybeten (2.498m), in Sharr Mountain massif in southern Kosovo bordering Macedonia, whereas the other is Pashtrik (1.989m) in western Kosovo on the border with Albania. Sharr Mountain massif, among others is well known for the famous ski resort in Brezovicë with its ski slopes among the best in the Balkans. Both of the mountains - Lybeten and Pashtrik

¹ Gollak and Karadak Mountains in eastern Kosovo, Shar Mountains dividing Kosovo and Macedonia in the south, Bjeshkët e Nemuna or Albanian Alps that divide Kosovo from Albania in the west, Kopaonik mountain massif in the north separating Kosovo from Serbia.



are distinguished by their characteristic shape, especially their striking “lonely” mountaintops directed to the sky.

In the mythology and oral tradition of Albanians, mountains are the sites where fairies reside. The cult of mountains remains present in different ways among Albanians. However, nowadays ancient beliefs and practices related to mountains are being abandoned and replaced with contemporary knowledge and practices, such as environmentalism, hiking, climbing, camping, and the like.

In the absence of research on the pilgrimages in these two mountains, in this paper I rely mainly on data collected from my observations in the field from 2007 onwards². My aim is to describe ritual practices at the top of these mountains on certain days of the year, as well as to describe the atmosphere created there. Although the distance between the two pilgrimage sites is less than 100 km, the differences between these two are enormous, however with some similar elements between the two.

PILGRIMAGE IN LYBETEN

Pilgrimage to Lybeten³ is done once a year, on the 2 of August, that is in mid-summer, popularly known as the Day of Aligjyn⁴. On the evening of 1 of August, many people, especially the young from the southern Kosovo villages, depart to Lybeten mountain to spend the evening in a festive atmosphere. People reach the field known as Stanet e Dubravës. Dubrava farm huts where woody vegetation ends in a grassland area, with tractors, trucks, cars, but also on foot. The journey is quite exciting during which juniors sing, whistle, shout for joy and make humour.

Residents of surrounding villages have a transhumance tradition inherited from ancient times. Herdsmen go to the mountains with their cattle and stay there from June until September or October. The Holiday of Aligjyn, i.e. the 1 and 2 nights of August, has special meaning for them. They are eager to join and celebrate with other people. The children of the herdsmen appear happy, as during these days the monotony of life in farm huts is broken. (Fig. 1)

Tents are placed and fires are lit in a large field. Besides cooking food, visitors chat, sing and dance. They take with them sound systems, or traditional musical instruments. The festival is spontaneous and tents are ordered in a non-planned manner. There are different types of tents: some are for families and relatives gather around the fire to chat, while some others are groups of friends who sing and drink tea, juices and beers with appetizers. In the grasslands around

2 In the 2007/2008 academic year I've started the PhD studies at the University of Strasbourg under the mentorship of prof. Eric Navet I worked on the thesis “*Beliefs and Ritual Practices among the Albanians in Kosovo. Reflections on an Ecoculture*”, which I've defended in February 2013. During that period, and after, I've collected more data on the beliefs, rituals and sanctuaries in Kosovo. A part of those data I have presented in IX EASR Conference in Messina, in 2009, then are published as proceedings (see Krasniqi 2013: 783-791).

3 Because there is no temple or sacred monument, but a mountain which is considered sacred, I had doubts whether the festival that takes place in Lybeten could be considered a pilgrimage. Having in mind the ritual prayers on the top of Lybeten before sunrise, as well as people going there in order to observe the sunrise, however, I think that it is justified to label as pilgrimage that which happens in Lybeten on the morning of 2 August.

4 *Aligjyn* (Tur. Ali Gun - Alia's Day). This holiday is observed on 2 August, a day considered as the very middle of summer. Ali was the Prophet Muhamed's grandson who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in an attempt to inherit the position of the prophet. The battle marks the split between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, that continues till today. Christians associate this holiday with the prophet Elijah.



Fig. 1 - Mountain of Lybeten, 2498m



Fig. 2 - Day of Aligjyn in Lybeten. August 2, 2007



Fig. 3 - Watching the sunrise from the Top of Lybeten, August 2, 2009



farm huts in the night between 1 and 2 August, real celebration take place. People make music, light fires, dance and sing until after midnight.

Once in the year 2009, a group of young people equipped with generators, reflectors and sound equipment with high sound system, played music to the maximum. The exciting rhythmic music attracted dancers so the circle got wider and wider. Resulting from a feeling of a spiritual liberation, the dancers sometimes fell down and move round on the ground. It seemed from their strange movements that they were experiencing a state of trance. (Fig. 2)

Shortly after midnight, groups of young people head to the top of Lybeten to observe the sunrise from there. Usually they depart in small groups of 10-15 people and take with them sheets to protect themselves from the cold and handheld electric torches to illuminate the rocky paths. The light that they emit, their whistles, cries and shouts; sighs and deep breaths that come from tiredness of after-midnight walking upward, create an impression of something extraordinary happening in Lybeten. It takes 3-4 hours of night walk to arrive at the highest point.

Lybeteni's top is too small to hold them all. When I reached the top of the mountain in 2009, there were over a hundred people. The moment that the disc of the sun appears on the horizon, all turn to watch, taking pictures and commenting on the fascinating sights. Getting inspired by the rise of the sun is the main motivation young people come here. The horizon where the sun rises appears much far and looks much lower than the peak level of the mountain. It reminds what Eliade says when explaining the concepts of the sacred and the profane: "Since the Sacred Mountain is an Axis Mundi connecting earth with heaven, it is a sense touches heaven, and hence marks the highest point in the world" (Eliade 2007: 39). It looks like from this position you are higher than the Sun itself for few minutes. Shortly after sunrise the descent begins. Those who have not arrived "on time" continue to climb uphill, obviously tired from walking and lack of sleep. (Fig. 3)

Since climbing on top of Lybeten is difficult, very few elderly go there. Those who climb up to pray, consider that the prayer on the height is much more acceptable to God. Some even claim that climbing to the top is a kind of hajj. In 2008 I met an old man aged 70, from the village Firajë, who although he performed the hajj, came for the morning prayer in the Peak of Lybeten because he considered it a sacred hill. In 2009 another person had come all the way from Preshevë, a town in southern Serbia, for the same purpose. A well-known Albanian ethnologist Mark Tirta connects the cult of mountain with the cult of the Sun. According to him "There existed among Albanians the cult of mountains or mountaintops which were worshiped; people worshiped it in the morning when the Sun rose" (Tirta 2006: 412). Although he names some mountains, such as Tomorr, Gjallicë, Rumia, Pashtrik, he nevertheless doesn't mention Lybeten where this ancient practice still preserved today.

During the last three to four years, for the Day of Aligjyn festival hiking associations and climbers groups organize excursions. These groups usually hold other equipment for climbing in the mountains (shimmering clothes, sticks, GPS, electric torches, tents, helmets, etc.). People from various organizations of civil society, various public institutions, and even the political establishment join these organized groups.

The mingling of locals who usually are not equipped with climbing kit, with those who wear shimmering clothes and backpacks, represent a kind of ambiguity between the ancient and the modern. In addition, more recently, the motorists in the region are organized into groups to reach Lybeten in the morning of the 2 August. They climb the steeper paths of the mountain with very high speed, creating spectacular scenery. Deafening sound of turbo engines and risky gestures are disturbing. Thus the essence of the ancient tradition of climbing Lybeten on the Day of Aligjyn is gradually transformed. New elements of contemporary and profane are replacing the old ritual practices, pertaining to sacralisation the mountain, the sun and nature in general.



Fig. 4 - Mountain of Pashtrik, 1989m

PILGRIMAGE IN PASHTRIK

Pilgrimage to Mount Pashtrik occurs in mid-summer season, from 2 to 22 August. Pilgrims are residents from Has region of Prizren and Gjakova, and in recent years residents from the border area of Albania.

The peak of Pashtrik not as sharp as that of Lybeten, is a plateau with broken relief, with peculiar rock formations, and deep abysses filled with snow. Rock layers created during earlier geological periods offer stunning views. Looking from the distance, the rocky plateau structures of Pashtrik, resemble the abandoned temples surrounded by walls. (Fig. 4).

Pilgrims come to the peak of Pashtrik to pray and leave gift (nezër) on Sari Saltik sepulchre⁵, which is also called the Holy Tomb of Pashtrik. In fact, the sepulchre in Pashtrik is not a real grave, as it is believed that the real grave of Sari Saltik is somewhere near Krujë in the mountains of Albania. However, it is a tomb erected to pay tribute and to leave gifts, as it is believed that there is one of his 72 sites (ziafete) in the Balkans. Near the Holy Tomb of Pashtrik, there are two newly constructed buildings, one used as a shelter for those who spend the night in Pashtrik

⁵ Sari Saltik - a holy man and the legend figure in Bektashi order. It is held that he was a dervish in the court of Sultan Orhan (1326-1360) or the direct disciple of Haji Bektash Veli - the founder of the Bektashi Order. (Elsie 2005: 181-183).



Fig 5 - Sacred Tomb of Pashtrik

and the other as food pantry. (Fig. 5)

The pilgrimage in Pashtrik has some similarities with that in Tomorr Albania, because it is performed roughly in the same period, but they are dedicated to different saints: in Tomorr to Abas Ali⁶, whereas that in Pashtrik to Sari Saltik. This sacred site is in the custody of the Great Tekke⁷ with its headquarters in Gjakovë. Most of the dervishes and Tekke staff stay there during the Pilgrimage, i.e. three weeks, but some swap, depending on their daily duties.

The pilgrims come in groups of several families. In the villages of the region, neighbourhoods are organized and leave at the same time with tractors and cars up to a point and then they commence walking up to the top. The main ritual pilgrims perform is the honouring the Holy Sepulchre. They give towels, shirts, coins or other things of nominal value to the Tomb. In addition they light candles and pray for their wishes. Some light candles in what is known among some people as The Holed Rock, or Women's Rock (Çoçaj 2012: 252) among others -

⁶ Abbas Ali - a sacred Muslim person. His tomb is located at the top of Mount Tomorr in Albania where Bektashi and other Albanian population perform pilgrimage. (Elsie 2005: 13)

⁷ Autocephalous Great Tekke of the Balkan - the first Tekke of Sadii Order in Kosovo and the Balkans, founded by Sulejman Axhiza Baba (1537-1652). Its headquarters is the town of Gjakovë in Kosovo.

which is about 50 meters further, on a peculiar rock. Legend has it that when enemies have surrounded Sari Saltik saint he supported his body on the rock, and it opened up and turned into a cave. At some time, it was a place where the ritual of “purification” was made by married couples having fertility issues. The couple entered the cave for bathing. Same as in Sharenicë⁸, some visitors take pebbles as a talisman from Pashtrik, to give to the others who cannot come or to keep them in their bodies until necessary.

Representatives of the Sadii Tekke, under which patronage the pilgrimage is done, say that this place has been considered sacred for more than two thousand years, but during the Communist Regime the pilgrimage has been banned. It was suspended in 1948, to resume again a year after the war in Kosovo, in 2000⁹.

I asked leader of the pilgrimage in Pashtrik about the ritual in Sharenicë, but received no answer. It seemed that there was a rivalry between the patrons of the holy sites and rituals performed there. The patrons of Pashtrik did not want to speak about the ritual that takes place in the opposite mountain, which is some three kilometres away on air distance. It was useless to insist on getting explanations for other sacred sites, and even for the ritual details done in Pashtrik. Sufism is essentially mysticism, and it is not easy for an instant visitor or a researcher in the field to understand mystical rituals immediately.

CONCLUSIONS

As these two pilgrimages have not been studied properly and, apart from television reports or documentaries¹⁰, there are no publications about them, I will try to draw some conclusions to briefly analyse the differences and similarities between them.

The main difference between these two pilgrimages is that the one in Lybeten is spontaneous and unorganized, with very relaxing atmosphere and essentially more naturalistic, whereas the one in Pashtrik is organized and institutional, and has more religious rituals and devotion.

There are no shrines or monuments in Lybeten, whereas in Pashtrik there is the Holy Tomb of Pashtrik, the cave in which candles are lit, and shelters that serve as infrastructure.

The most interesting point in Lybeten’s pilgrimage is the climbing at night in order to see the sunrise. It is in this aspect that the pilgrimage to Lybeten resembles some pilgrimages the Far East countries. The pilgrimage to Pashtrik lasts longer, but it usually occurs during the days. With its form and content, this pilgrimage resembles more the one in Tomorri, Albania.

In both cases the pilgrimages take place in August. Nevertheless, the pilgrimage to Lybeten lasts only one day, whereas the one to Pashtrik lasts three weeks. Because the peaks of these mountains represent the border areas in both cases, participants also come from neighbouring countries; in Lybeten from Macedonia, while in Pashtrik from Albania.

8 Sharenicë is referred to as a holy place for the population of some villages of Rahovec in south-western Kosovo, where the rite of passage through the stone in the night between 8 and 9 August is performed. Prehistoric art symbols are engraved on the surface of this stone. Most of these symbols are abstract geometric figures. (Krasniqi 2013: 79-80).

9 Because Pashtrik’s Holy Tomb is located right on the border between Albania and former Yugoslavia whose part Kosovo was, the communist regimes of the two countries interrupted pilgrimage to this place in order to secure the border. This happened because in that year (1948) relations between the two countries broke-down and borders were strictly controlled. Pashtrik’s Holy Tomb was at the border between Kosovo and Albania. (Shehu 2009: 79).

10 In August 2003, Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK) and Blue Sky Radio have made a documentary about the pilgrimage in Lybeten. Authors: THAÇI, Ilaz, MYFTARI, Berat, (2003). Documentary: Dita e Aligjynit, Ed. Diku në Kosovë, RTK & Blu Sky.



In both cases, local people tell myths and legends about these mountains. The legend about a ship that was stationed at the top of the mountain is told in relation to both Lybeten and Pashtrik. There are also other myths, legends and interesting stories related to these mountains. With their unique appearance, these two mountains bestow on the countryside stunning and magnificent landscapes. Ultimately, these mountains add more value to the spiritual and natural heritage of Kosovo.

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