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‘We are *New-born* Muslims’: Reconstructing Religious Identity among Albanian Migrants in Italy

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Abstract

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted with members of the Union of Albanian Muslims in Italy (UAMI) to examine the identity reconfiguration processes of Albanian Muslim migrants to Italy since the late 1990s. After the fall of Albania's Communist regime, Albanian Muslims were forced to renegotiate their identity in relation to national culture and its secular and religious legacies in a new context. The analysis illustrates how being both migrants and minorities in Italy shaped processes of identification and strategies adopted by UAMI members to articulate a specifically Albanian Muslim presence. As a space for cultural and religious mediation, the UAMI constructs a sense of belonging based on shared religious imaginaries and national specificity within a field already structured by non-Albanian Islamic organisations. The article underscores the role of religious organisations in enabling collective identification in which cultic and cultural factors intertwine in complex ways in diasporic and minority contexts.

Keywords

Albanian Muslims – Muslims in Europe – Islam and migration – religious identity – religion and migration

1 Introduction¹

Since Italy has become a migration destination more recently than other European countries such as France, Germany and the UK, Islam and Muslim migrants to the country have only attracted scholarly attention beginning with the 1990s. First, sociological research focused on specific migrant communities and discussed the challenges they faced at the religious and institutional level (see, e.g., Allievi and Dassetto, 1993; Schmidt di Friedberg, 1994; Saint-Blancat, 1999; Allievi, 2003; Rhazzali, 2011). Anthropological studies followed around a decade later, drawing attention to the transnational dynamics that shaped the lives of migrants and their children (see, e.g., Salih, 2001, 2003; Riccio, 2001, 2006; Giacalone, 2002; Notarangelo, 2011; Copertino, 2013; Cingolani and Ricucci, 2014; Ferrero, 2018). Although these areas of research continued to flourish in the following two decades, Albanian-speaking Muslims from Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo have been largely ignored within this literature.

Albanians gained the spotlight in Italian affairs when a ship named after the port city of Vlore (*Vlora*) reached the port of Bari on 8 August 1991 crammed with 20,000 refugees. Since then, Albanians – who today represent one of the three most numerous groups of migrants in the country – have been the subject of much academic attention (see, e.g., Melchionda, 2003; Romania, 2004; Vathi, 2015). However, religion is rarely mentioned in these works. Several reasons lie behind this omission, one of them being the effective decline of religious practice in the country (Bougarel, 2005; Clayer, 2010; Elbasani and Roy, 2015a; Giakoumis, 2022) after 45 years of strict self-enclosed Communism and statism built around the cult of the personality of Enver Hoxha (1908–1985). The regime stripped religion from public life, erasing its presence even from the most intimate practices such as marriages and funerals. Other scholars have highlighted deeper historical reasons for Albanians' relatively low level of religiosity, such as the multi-religious nature of Albania, the important role

¹ The two authors have contributed equally to the writing of this article, though Vicini has been the main author of the second and the third sections, and Cascino of the fourth and the fifth sections. The introduction and the conclusions have been co-written by both authors.

played by Christianity in the formation of national identity after 1912 (Bieber, 2000), and the prominence of a lenient form of Islam such as Bektashism over more 'orthodox' ones (Doja, 2000; Babuna, 2003).² Furthermore, as in other Balkan countries, the Albanian nationalist project maintained an ambivalent attitude toward Islam, which was seen as the antithesis of a wished-for European identity (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a), dissociating themselves from other 'non-European' Muslims (Bougarel, 2005). The bottom line is that most Albanians, also thanks to the strategic use of their 'whiteness' (Romania, 2004), were not perceived as Muslims, nor did they present themselves as such to Italian society after their arrival.

This article illustrates the story of those 'other' Albanians who, migrating to Italy since the late 1990s, actively foregrounded their Muslimness as a distinctive dimension of their identity. It draws upon their stories to investigate how they construct their identity as Albanian Muslims in the new country of migration. Their accounts confirm in part what is stated in the works listed above, pointing out that 45 years under the Communist regime deprived almost two generations of Albanians of the possibility of practising and publicly expressing their religion. However, they also defy these narratives, showing the resilience of Islamic practices during the Communist era and how such practices have been reinterpreted in complex and diverse ways since the fall of the regime (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a). In this sense, they help to counter what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Schiller (2002) define as 'methodological nationalism' (Blumi, Krasniqi, 2014; Henig, 2020) – an inclination to assimilate the anti-Islamic and Orientalist views that have dominated Albanian national ideology during and after the Communist period (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a; Sulstarova, 2015).

Unlike other studies on Albanian Islam, this article sheds light on processes of Muslim identity reconstruction not in Albania but in the context of migration to a European country, Italy. The aim is to examine how Albanian migrants reconstruct their religiosity in this context, reconnecting with an imagined Muslim national past but also adjusting their religious practices to life in a secularised public space.³ The focus is the reconstruction of Albanian

2 Whereas an older census (1945) declared 72.8% of the population to be Muslim (Sciarra, 1996), others have more recently provided lower figures; the 2011 census estimated that only 56.7% of Albanians identified as Muslim, 2% Bektashi, 13.7% non-religious, 10% Catholic, and 6.7% Orthodox Christian (Blumi and Krasniqi, 2014: 480), and the most recent (2023) census stated that the Muslim population did not exceed 46% (INSTAT: 70). Though contested, these figures illustrate the multi-religious nature of the country.

3 Scholarship has shown that there is no unique model of secularism in Europe (Modood and Kastoryano, 2007). In the Italian case, for instance, Catholicism plays an important role

migrants' identity in light of their attachment to the Islamic tradition, while the issue of visibility and negotiation with the secular context has been addressed in another recent publication by one of the authors of the present article (Cascino, 2025).

The article focuses on the Union of Albanian Muslims in Italy (Unione degli Albanesi Musulmani in Italia; UAMI), a network of small Albanian-speaking Muslim groups scattered throughout central and northern Italy. It was established in 2009 by a group of university students and workers who migrated to Italy between 1999 and 2004.⁴ As will be shown, the UAMI, as an Albanian-exclusive Muslim organisation, aims to create a balance between national identity (including the Albanian language and its secular past) and Muslim religiosity. This blend is certainly a reinterpretation of tradition, and one that should not necessarily be understood as the outcome of a process of 'individualisation of religion' (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a, 2015b) (see below). As shown below, associationism has been a key vector in the process of redefinition of their identity as Albanian Muslims in the context of migration to a European country.

As with other groups of Muslims who have come to Italy from other countries, 'Muslimness' becomes a decisive catalyst of identity reconstruction (Vicini, 2021). Yet, in this case, it is understood within a specific 'post-Soviet' Albanian framework that encompasses specific cultural elements that distinguish Albania from other Muslim-majority countries of origin.⁵ This specificity will be highlighted to show how the 'cultural' dimension shapes the 'cultic' in particular ways. The article explores these issues, drawing upon ethnographic research conducted at the UAMI's local branch in Genoa and during two of its national meetings. It also draws on digital ethnography of UAMI social media

in the public sphere, shaping the national political culture by entering key public debates. Religious minorities, including Albanian Muslims, navigate and reconstruct their religiosity in this Christian-centric context (Salih, 2009).

- 4 The role of students was pivotal, as it had historically been for other Muslim organisations in Italy. The Muslim students' association movement that emerged in Italy in the 1970s, first organised as a network of local branches of the USMI (Union of Muslim Students in Italy) scattered across major Italian cities, was seminal for the foundation of new Muslim associations that appeared in the country in the following years.
- 5 The government of Albania does not have an institutional arm that is intended to provide religious assistance to its citizens who live abroad, unlike other Muslim-majority countries, such as Morocco and Turkey. No links or engagement with Albanian embassies or consulates emerged during the research. The absence of institutional support may result in reliance on local or foreign religious organisations, as in the case of the Genoa UAMI branch, which was affiliated with the Moroccan community before purchasing and establishing its Albanian Islamic centre.

pages and nearly 20 in-depth interviews with its founders, current leaders, and other members. The first meeting attended was the UAMI annual conference in Lignano Sabbiadoro in April 2024, which drew around 400 participants. The second meeting, held in Salsomaggiore Terme in December that year, was a smaller gathering of around 100 people. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted online, while the others took place face-to-face. The semi-structured interviews explored the interviewees' relationship with religion in Albania, including formal and informal religious education, religious practice and identity perception in the context of migration.

2 Identity Reconstruction in the Context of Migration

Since the late 1970s, a significant number of studies in the sociology of religion have begun exploring the relevance of religion in reconstructing the group identity of migrants in the North American context (Haddad and Lummis, 1987; Hammond, 1988; Warner and Wittner, 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). Countering the still-influential secularisation theses of the 1960s and 1970s, these works pointed out the rising relevance of religion and ethnicity and their complex interconnection in modern urban contexts (Smith, 1978; Hammond, 1988). They have highlighted how religion has become even more salient in diasporic contexts (Warner and Wittner, 1998), showing how it served as a social support for the first generation of immigrants as they adjusted to the host society. These studies also noted that the relationship between ethnicity and religion is often intricate, with some groups focusing more on their shared religious identity, while others rely on religious institutions to preserve their ethnic identities (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001: 367).

More recent works have drawn upon this literature, demonstrating that Islam continues to play a similar role for new generations of Muslims born and raised in Western liberal societies, providing them with a source for identity reconstruction in a secularised context (Allievi and Nielsen, 2003; Waardenburg, 2003; Roy, 2004; Cesari, 2007). They have highlighted how Muslims with a migrant background have redefined their identities under the influence of a series of factors such as the secular nature of their host societies, their socio-economic and legal context, the international environment, and the internal diversity within Muslim communities themselves (Duderija, 2008).

In the last four decades, particularly following the events of 9/11, a process of 'religification' has been observed within Western societies, resulting in migrants increasingly identifying and defining themselves as 'Muslims'.

This phenomenon is accompanied by an increasing tendency among others to project a religious rather than an ethnic identity upon them (Peek, 2005; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). In this regard, Adis Duderija (2008) has highlighted the centrality of a self/other-boundary mutual identity construction dialectic based on in-group/civilisational identification as key to understanding processes of Western Muslims' identity reconstruction. Muslims with a migrant background also tend to identify primarily in terms of Muslimness in response to processes of categorisation and exclusion they have experienced as a result of their encountering rising Islamophobia and forms of institutional racism in Western countries.⁶ Additionally, Islam can reinforce religious consciousness because it works as an identity linchpin in the new society (Duderija, 2008), as demonstrated by the fact that Muslim immigrants in Europe show high levels of Muslim identification (Verkuyten, 2007; Thomas and Sanderson, 2011).

These factors also played a role in the case explored in this article (e.g. migrants' own definition and positioning as 'Muslims' vis-à-vis Italian society). Yet, what emerges more clearly from our interlocutors' narratives is how, in the context of migration, they found in the UAMI the institutional and socialising venue through which to reconnect with their Muslim past by gathering with other compatriots with similar religious sensibilities. This process was fuelled by in-group differentiation dynamics, through which they distinguished themselves from other non-religious Albanian associations and individuals. The religious factor plays a distinctive boundary role in this case (Barth, 1969). As self-identified Muslims, our interlocutors founded the UAMI to experience their Albanianness within a religiously-connoted environment. While the religious boundary set a distinction from 'secular' national Albanians, the national identification has been retained as an important line of distinction from other ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia who, as shown below, have organised themselves in separate associations. This can be traced back to Albania's very specific history as compared with that of other Balkan countries that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia, demonstrating that identity construction is dynamic and multilayered rather than relying on isolated dichotomous oppositions (Hutnik, 1986; Jacobson, 1997).

6 This is also the case in Italy where Islam – the second religion in the country by number of practitioners – is still not recognised by the state and where its perception is conditioned by the state's historical connection with Catholic institutions (Salih, 2009; Anello, 2020). This institutional framework has worsened since the so-called migration crisis of the 2000s, which has encouraged many politicians to appeal to the Christian roots of their country and of Europe (Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010), thereby unleashing Islamophobia as a strategy to gain political support.

In this regard, it is useful to specify that, rather than prioritising self-explanatory factors in the definition of groups' identity such as ethnicity, class and gender, this article focuses on the narratives articulated by the social actors themselves, based on the claim that the understanding of identity construction dynamics benefits from such a focus (Jacobson, 1997). Paying attention to such narratives does not mean giving priority to taken-for-granted assumptions about ethnic identity and belonging, but rather highlighting more complex dynamics that underlie the construction of multilayered kinds of identities that include other layers of identification beyond Albanianness, such as with other Muslims (in Italy, Europe, and beyond) or with what are perceived as identity elements of the receiving country, including those embodying an idea of 'modernity' such as Western rock music.

As exemplified by Bilen, a young man in his forties who came to Italy at the beginning of the 2000s to study medicine, our interlocutors conceive of themselves as new types of Muslims, whose identity is shaped by several factors, including the experience of socialisation in the host society:

Most people left Albania after decades of imposed atheism. [...] They never had a chance to learn about religion and are Muslims in name only. In contrast, those who practise are often 'new-born Muslims' – people who discovered rock music and the West, only to later realise they have an old, hidden tradition. Although I grew up with some religious traditions in my family, I'm a mix of influences. If you saw me in the operating room, you'd hear ACDC, but I still start surgery with 'Bismillah'. Our generation is like that. [...] We are products of our time – both the Communist and post-Communist periods. We've transferred to Italy, trying to preserve our roots [...] while being respectful of the values of the host country.⁷

Researching Albanian and Bosnian communities in Switzerland, paraphrasing Baumann (2002: 100), Samuel Behloul (2016: 69) argues that diasporas operate through 'processes institutionalisation and community building' that imply mechanisms of 'identity formation and retention; religious traditionalisation, adaptation, and innovation in the new context'. Migrants define their identity by relating to their national and religious past, as they organise themselves in communities nested in the host context. Albanian-speaking Muslims employ a multifaceted approach to defining their identity, encompassing a profound

7 Interview with Bilen, 25 June 2024. To protect the privacy of our interlocutors, their names have been changed.

adaptation of both their national and religious heritages to a novel environment. To better explore these dynamics, it is beneficial to begin with our interlocutors' shared post-Communist past.

3 Islam in a Post-Communist Space

Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, scholars started using the terms 'post-Socialism' and 'post-Communism' to define the social, political and economic transformations that countries of the former Eastern Bloc were undergoing at the time. After more than 30 years, the validity of this category continues to be debated within the fields of Central European and Central Asian studies (Gallinat, 2022). Useful parallels can still be traced between post-Communist realities even beyond the ex-Soviet space, including Albania and other Balkan countries. The term 'post-Communism' has already been employed for this purpose by studies on the resurgence of Islam in Albania. Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (2015a, 2015b) detected common trends of Islam in the Balkans after 1990, such as the steady imprint of 'socialist-style' secularisation, the role played by international foreign actors (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Turkey), and the growing impact that these countries' participation in a broader European space might have on Islam.

Anthropological works on the re-emergence of Islam in the broader post-Communist space show that Islamic practice was prohibited or put under strict state surveillance. Religious education was removed from society and any contact with the rest of the Muslim world was severed. However, a substratum of religiosity continued to survive in the form of what some authors have called 'lived religion' (Louw, 2007; Rasanayagam, 2011). Islam remained present in the folds of everyday life, shaping key rites of passage (e.g., the circumcision of boys, marriage celebrations, and funeral prayers). Fasting during Ramadan and praying on Fridays continued to be practised, though generally by the elders and in the private space of their homes, where they also often kept a copy of the Qur'an.⁸ It was in these intimate niches that a connection with the Muslim past was maintained and passed down to the new generations within certain families.

8 In Albania, this was generally present in the Albanian translation, most likely that of Sherif Ahmeti, an Albanian from Kosovo, whose text has gained widespread circulation since 1990. Before this version, there was a single partial translation of the Qur'an into Albanian, dating back to 1921 and attributed to Ilo Qafezezi, though it was criticised on doctrinal grounds (Gori, 2000: 130–1).

However, after the Albanian Communist regime declared the country non-religious in 1967, prohibitions extended even to marriage and funerary rituals, while circumcision of boys was reportedly allowed, though the practice was disassociated from any kind of Muslim ritual. The regime of Enver Hoxha tore down thousands of religious infrastructures and replaced religious holidays with national ones. A strict regime of surveillance existed that included a dense web of informants who collected data on school absences and workers’ leave during Islamic holidays, even linking them with aggregate consumption of confectionery goods to deduce who still celebrated (Giakoumis, 2022: 233). Despite this system and the risk of imprisonment, Albanians of various religious confessions continued to practise their religion secretly, doing their best not to be noticed by their neighbours’ malicious eyes (*ibid.*).⁹

With the collapse of the regime between 1990 and 1991, people were newly free to live and express their religiosity, and specific Muslim institutions were revived for this purpose.¹⁰ However, secularised older generations and intellectuals resisted this trend by upholding Albanianism as a ‘civil religion’.¹¹ Ethnopolitical narratives that identified Albanian identity with ethnic and linguistic commonalities remained dominant, and little space was left for religion within Albanian nationalism, despite religious clerics’ claims that religious communities had also supported the Albanian national struggle (Endresen, 2013). It was especially in response to this new post-Communist shift toward a secular form of nationalism that some of the younger generation began to show a renewed interest in religion.

9 According to Article 55 of the 1977 Penal Code (cited in Young, 1990: 33; Giakoumis, 2022: 223), the punishment for practising one’s confession could be up to three years in jail in peace time and up to ten years in time of war.

10 The main Muslim organisation in Albania is the KMSH (Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë [Muslim Community of Albania; MCA]), a non-state actor first established in 1923 as part of the national reforms to create an Albanian Islam, including the establishment of the Civil Code, the abolition of the Ottoman Sharia and *mecelle*, the Friday holiday, and the veil for women (Sciarra, 1996:7–14; Jazexhi, 2018: 51). Shut down in 1967, the KMSH was revived in 1990 and in 2008 signed an agreement with the state that made it responsible for the administration of Islamic schools (*madrasas*) and training centres for imams. Interestingly, for many years the KMSH has been under the control of the Turkish Gülen movement, which has been active in opening a network of schools throughout the country since 1992 (Agai, 2002; Blumi and Krasniqi, 2014). However, this hegemony has been recently challenged by the AKP-led Turkish government, which has used all means at its disposal to eradicate the Gülen movement from Albania (Bria, 2023) as well as from many other foreign countries.

11 The term ‘Albanianism’ is frequently employed in the literature to discuss the relationship between religion and national identity in Albania, a dyad in which the national-ethnic factor is generally prioritised over the religious (Duijzings, 2002; Endresen, 2013).

These struggles are encapsulated by Bilen, a leading figure in the establishment of the UAMI during his ten years in Italy, when he says: 'Being religious in Albania in the 1990s meant being considered against the nation.'¹² After the fall of the regime, being Muslim was seen as a symbol of change and a break from Communism, but also from the secular national identity established in the previous years. Consequently, new generations of Albanians willing to rediscover their religious past first met resistance from their parents, who continued to regard Islam with a mix of fear and scepticism. Some of our interlocutors remember how after 1990, even practising the daily prayer was seen as problematic:

I encountered significant challenges living a faithful life, partly due to my parents' disapproval. [...] From their perspective, my adherence to Islamic practices was perceived as an expression of *extremism*. I was the first of their children to express a keen interest in religion. They believed that religion was an essential guide for living a good life, teaching us to avoid hurting others, telling lies, stealing, and behaving badly. However, for them, it was not about adhering to a strict prayer routine or observing other specific practices.¹³

The resistance that even Albanian families with a Muslim background had toward accepting basic Muslim practices can also be seen in their attitude toward veiling. Anbeta, an active member of the UAMI, recalls the years of her education in Albania, in the 2000s, when she decided to attend a *madrassa* (Islamic high school) because the highly ranked school near her home did not welcome veiled girls. Although the prohibition on veiling was not codified into law, the school administration was predominantly composed of atheists born and raised during the dictatorship, who saw Islam as a relic of the past that hindered social progress. Despite advice from both her peers and acquaintances not to wear the veil to avoid discrimination, Anbeta remained resolute in her decision.¹⁴

Majlinda, another woman resident in Italy since 2004 and very involved in the UAMI, recounted the difficulties she faced in wearing the veil in the small provincial town where she lived in the second half of the 1990s:

12 Interview with Bilen, 25 June 2024.

13 Interview with Blerian, 27 June 2024.

14 Fieldnotes, 4 September 2024.

At the time, foreign associations had brought the *burqa* to the country, which made some people unhappy. They looked down on people from Arab countries who were also 'taking land'. [...] I was the only girl in the village wearing a veil. When I put it on, my mother cried. My cousin, an elderly lady, told her not to worry because nobody would want to marry a veiled woman, and I would stay at home taking care of her. For them, the veil was a taboo [...]. The same applied to prayer.¹⁵

A second important element that emerges from our interlocutors' accounts is the threat of 'religious extremism' as it was perceived at the time by political and intellectual elites, who denounced the rising influence of Gulf countries, Turkey and Iran in the Islamisation of the country. Indeed, these actors played an important role in spreading new doctrinal views among the 'new-born Muslims'.¹⁶ As reported by one of the founders of the UAMI:

Following 1990, there was an influx of a more orthodox interpretation in the country, in contrast with the period prior to 1990, when religion was practised in a more spiritual manner, albeit clandestinely. This shift led to a transformation in which religion became a 'technique of practice' – that is, an approach where religious practices were followed in a more mechanical manner.¹⁷

Foreign actors contributed to the diffusion of a more 'orthodox' interpretation of Muslim practice, which now had to abide by certain standards. This also often collided with established local traditions, such as the consumption of pork and alcohol (which was common even in families that self-identified as Muslims before 1967),¹⁸ the refusal to believe in the afterlife, and what these foreign religious actors perceived as heterodox traditions, such as Mevluds (Bria, 2021) and visiting saints' tombs. But this did not hinder the maintenance of specific 'Albanian' tendencies in the way Islam was interpreted in the country. As will be illustrated below, cultural-national and religious elements are recombined within the UAMI in new and original forms.

15 Interview with Majlinda, 17 July 2024.

16 It is notable that this represents another interesting parallel with what happened in the post-Soviet world, particularly in Central Asia, after 1990.

17 Interview with Ermal, 13 June 2024.

18 Interviews with Blerian, 27 June, 2024, and Dritan, 3 July 2024.

4 Albanian Muslims in Italy

Albanians started migrating en masse to Italy in 1991, after the fall of the Communist regime (Piperno, 2002: 2), with another peak between the end of 1996 and the spring of 1997 as a result of the civil unrest that followed the collapse of the national economy.¹⁹ Since the 1990s, Albanians have been one of the largest non-EU communities in Italy (416,829 people as of 2022), slightly outnumbering Moroccans, another historical community present in the peninsula since the 1970s (IDOS: 346). These numbers do not include those who have obtained Italian citizenship (more than 300,000 in the period 2012–2023 alone; see INSTAT), supporting the claim that, in 2022, migrants of Albanian origin were the most numerous among those from non-EU countries who acquired Italian citizenship.²⁰ The geographical distribution of these people follows that of the general migratory path, with the highest concentrations in the richest northern regions of Lombardy, Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, though Albanians also have a significant presence in some regions of the south such as Puglia (4.6% of the total of Albanian immigrants to Italy), a fact linked to the region's geographical proximity to Albania.²¹

In his study of the ethnically Albanian and Bosnian populations living in Switzerland, Behloul (2016: 68) argues that, for people of Balkan origin, it is necessary to consider the transnational as well as intranational relations that shape ethnocultural identity, as 'in South-Eastern Europe, migrants perceive their nation as cutting across the boundaries of state and citizenship' (ibid.). If we think of Albanians as an 'ethnocultural nation', they are in fact spread over four different states: Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia. During the research, it emerged that all ethnic Albanians could take part, either individually or in the form of local associations, in the UAMI, which functions as an umbrella organisation. This applies to the Forum Alb Trentino (FAT), based in Pergine Valsugana, where the management group includes Albanians and North Macedonians.

At the same time, however, Albanians coming from North Macedonia tend to perceive themselves as distinct from those with Albanian citizenship,

19 Previous migration patterns date back to the *Arbëreshë* communities that settled in the Kingdom of Naples between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, but the recent waves are entirely separate from these earlier arrivals.

20 Direzione Generale dell'immigrazione e delle politiche di integrazione del Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, *La comunità albanese in Italia. Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti*, (2023: 3) <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita-immigrazione/studi-e-statistiche/summary-presenza-migranti-2023-albania> (accessed 23 January 2026).

21 Ibid.

because they arrived through different migration patterns and experienced different Communist and national histories.²² The reasons for the distinction also include different theological orientations, as in the case of the North Macedonians-only Religious Islamic Community of Italy (BFI – ITALI Bashkësia Fetare Islame ne Itali), whose leader highlighted that, unlike the UAMI's management, he has received formal training as an imam.²³ Similar distinctions were more difficult to see with regard to Kosovars; they are a tiny minority in Italy because many left for other European countries after the economic crisis of 2008 and, to date, they do not have a specific national or inter-regional religious association.

Balkan Muslims more generally share a sort of 'religious invisibility' in the European context, which is due to their experience of having been a minority in their countries of origin as well as to their tendency to disassociate from 'non-European' Muslims whom the wider public associates with international jihadism and violence in Europe (Bougarel, 2005). This invisibility particularly increased after 9/11, in contrast to other Muslim groups who adopted a 'reactive ethnicity' stance that strengthened their ethnic and religious identities vis-à-vis the Italian context (Elliot, 2009; Molteni and Dimitriadis, 2021: 1499–1500). These differences have contributed to a reduction in the negative stereotyping of Albanians, who have also been able take advantage of exposure to Italian culture before migration (King and Mai, 2008), their tendency toward 'social mimicry' (Romania, 2004) and the lack of externally visible marks of religiosity (Zinn, 2005: 263, 270).

In all these studies, the issue of identity has mainly been seen as an individual, de-collectivised issue. The associational factor does not emerge as decisive, even in studies carried out in the first decade of the new millennium (Kosic and Triandafyllidou, 2003; King and Mai, 2008; Elbasani and Roy, 2015a, 2015b), which continue to emphasise a tendency toward individualisation of the religious experience of Balkan Muslims after the fall of Communism (King and Mai, 2004: 474) and the opening of a 'market of religiosity' that followed in the region (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a: 12; 2015b). In a context of migration such as that investigated in this article, however, religious associations play a decisive role in the articulation of a Muslim identity in line with a specific Albanian history and trajectory. Albanian Muslims in Italy first organised in informal groups and then sought institutionalisation, thereby contradicting

22 In the case of Pergine Valsugana and Cembra (Val di Cembra), in the Trentino region, they came as workers in the local porphyry factories in the 1980s.

23 Gazmir spent five and a half years in Saudi Arabia, studying at the Islamic University of Medina. Interview with Gazmir, 16 July 2024.

the presumed tendency to reject official structures after 1990 (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a, 2015b). Within the UAMI, they experience religiosity in a less individual manner, merging culture and tradition with their religious belonging.

5 Muslim Identity between Cultic and Cultural Dimensions

As mentioned in the previous sections, the founders of the UAMI were almost all people whose families had a Muslim religious background but who went through what they called a process of 're-conversion' to Islam after 1990. Having left Albania around the age of 18, these young adults still had many questions about what being an Albanian Muslim should imply. As Blerian put it: 'We created the UAMI for the sake of belonging, to be able to put together the pieces of our religion, but also the pieces of our culture, of our national identity.'²⁴ In fact, most of the founders of the UAMI were already involved in local groups in the cities where they lived, or had at least enjoyed the presence of prayer halls long before 2009.²⁵ Consequently, it was not so much the need for places to pray or meet that drove them to establish the UAMI but rather the need to address common religious and identitarian issues as Albanian Muslims.

In this regard, our interlocutors described the UAMI network's periodic gatherings as necessary for creating a 'sense of belonging' with their fellow citizens by experiencing an 'authentic' Albanian atmosphere. Albanian is the language used in their social media and WhatsApp groups, as well as at their meetings – except during religious rituals, when Arabic is preferred. This is also true for religious education, with the exception of children and adolescents, the majority of whom were born and raised in Italy. Similarly, Albanian-speaking imams and religious leaders from the Balkans or from neighbouring European countries such as Switzerland are invited to their meetings. They explained this in cultural rather than religious terms: 'When we had meetings with other Albanians, even before the formation of the UAMI, we always called the imams from Albania, because it was a question of identity.'²⁶

While many of them are active in other Islamic associations both at the local and national level, they want to live their religion in a specific Albanian way. Immigration has taken place from Islamic countries of the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region since the 1970s, leading to the formation of

24 Interview with Blerian, 27 June 2024.

25 As of 2001 the Italian government counted 375 places of Islamic worship in Italy (Gritti, Allam, 2001:50).

26 Interview with Blerian, 27 June 2024.

today's well-established national organisations, such as the Union of Islamic Communities and Organisations in Italy (UCOII) and the Italian Islamic Confederation (CII). Consequently, when Albanian Muslims arrived, they found themselves surrounded by an already consolidated socio-religious Muslim landscape. This dynamic prompted a reflection on their own way of interpreting the religious tradition vis-à-vis these other Muslims. See for example the following words of Bilen, Ermal and Blerian:

When we set up the UAMI, it was important for us to gather as Albanians because in the local mosques there were other ethnic groups, but we had a different history. For example, for North African Muslims, the main issue was that of girls being forced to wear the veil. [...] In our community, though, we had our own set of challenges. The girls wore the veil, and their parents either rejected or did not accept them. We realised that we had our own unique issues and needs. We thought that by creating our own association, we could help other Albanian Muslims more effectively.²⁷

We were looking for a sense of connection with each other, to meet someone else from Albania who was like us. The current situation in Gaza shocks me. It is a tragedy. [...] They are Muslims like us, but being an Albanian Muslim is different [...]. There is a connection, a feeling of belonging ... your heart starts to beat. [...] I have also had a lot of relationships with Maghrebians and Algerians, but I have never felt the type of attachment [I feel at the UAMI].²⁸

The idea of establishing the UAMI came about to address a gap. Although Islamic centres were already present in our cities [...] this was not enough. We wanted to create a sense of community and bring together aspects of our religion and culture, as well as our national identity. The UAMI was created to address these needs.²⁹

Language clearly occupied a central place in our interlocutors' decision to set up their own organisation. They did not have Arabic as a common language with West Asian and North African Muslims. Further, they had a specific relationship with their post-Communist past and there were also cultural divergences – from food to music to forms of socialisation – that shaped

²⁷ Interview with Bilen, 25 June 2024.

²⁸ Interview with Ermal, 13 June 2024.

²⁹ Interview with Blerian, 27 June 2024.

their own experience and interpretation of Islam. The way they approach key Muslim obligations clearly exemplifies these differences.

Take, for example, the story of Admeta, a young woman who arrived in Italy at the beginning of the 2000s to study biology at university. During one of our conversations, quite surprisingly, she revealed that she had only discovered that pork is not allowed in Islam when another Albanian immigrant girl told her about it in Italy. As her new friend was choosing what to have for dinner one evening, she said that she would not eat pork. Admeta asked, 'Why?' and she replied: 'Because I am Muslim.' This apparently caused a shift in Admeta's mind, as until then, she had thought that being Muslim for a woman mainly meant wearing the veil. Instead, her friend did not wear the veil but she did not eat pork. She was a medical student and Admeta soon discovered that she prayed regularly, fasted during Ramadan and did not drink alcohol. In short, as she said, 'She was a Muslim in every way' – apart from veiling.³⁰

The five daily prayers and the monthly fast during Ramadan were identified as the two cornerstones of Muslim practice for our interlocutors. Specifically, daily prayers were associated with attending prayer rooms and praying in the company of other Muslims. However, people attending UAMI meetings did not always follow this rule. At the 2024 UAMI meetings in Lignano Sabbiadoro and Salsomaggiore Terme, for instance, the majority, though not all, of those present performed the prayer. This also applied to veiling.³¹ During the UAMI meeting in Lignano, almost half of the participants wore the veil most of the time. However, even those who normally did not wear the veil, did so during the prayers. Apparently, veiling was perceived by the women as an implicit obligation during prayers, while for the rest of the time, they were free to decide whether to comply with this obligation or not. At the same time, their choice in this did not mark any difference among women in terms of participation in the plenary session or during the meetings specifically for women. Significantly, the only woman on the UAMI board of directors does not wear the veil and a significant number of women and girls do not wear it during UAMI periodical meetings.

Other pillars of Islam, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca or almsgiving (*zakat*), were discussed less than prayer in relation to issues of belonging, although the

³⁰ Interview with Admeta, 11 July 2024.

³¹ The issue of female dress in Islam has been the subject of considerable debate within the global Muslim community, with questions as to whether women should wear a veil, and, if so, in what form. A spectrum of interpretations exists, ranging from the most restrictive to those that espouse a more liberal approach. Some even exclude the presence of such obligations in primary Islamic sources (Mernissi, 1991; Watson, 1994; Ahmed, 2011).

UAMI encourages *zakat* through the 5×1000 system³² and the performance of the pilgrimage.³³ In general, however, as with prayer and veiling, adhering to the pillars of Islamic conduct was not seen as essential and, within the UAMI, sharing a sense of religiosity among people coming from the same cultural background was seen as more relevant. As stated by Besim, a middle-aged man who had arrived in Italy in 2004 and had played an important role in the founding of the UAMI:

We are very inclusive. [...] If someone wants to come but doesn't want to pray, that's fine. We are open, we don't want to close the doors to anyone. Maybe someone comes only to the part of the conference he wants to hear, and there is no problem with that.³⁴

These words clearly illustrate the specificity of the UAMI as an organisation aimed at promoting a Muslim identity, but without imposing on its members a strict set of rules and obligations. This attitude responds to the specific needs of Albanian Muslims, who have to negotiate a complex relationship with their Muslim heritage and Communist past while reconstructing a sense of Albanian Muslim identity within the Italian context.

People at the UAMI continuously navigate between the cultic and cultural dimensions in their activities, with a decisive inclination toward the latter. The act of considering some practices generally seen as fundamental by other Muslims as important but not essential reflects the UAMI's priority mission of recreating an Albanian-specific Muslim identity. A founder of the UAMI, who has been in Italy for more than 20 years and is very active in his city's Islamic centre as well as in the UAMI network, explained this by differentiating between the cultic and cultural dimensions of Muslim associations:

In my city, we live the everyday; we meet every day; and it would be wrong to divide into communities. [...] The UAMI is a community that does not ask its members to distance themselves from the local associations in

32 The five per thousand law enables taxpayers to voluntarily donate 0.5% of their income tax to organisations that support social causes. Until 2025, through its social media channels, the UAMI has invited its members to donate to the only two Albanian-only Muslim cultural centres, the Associazione Albanesi Liguria (Albanian Association in the Liguria region) in Genoa and the above-mentioned Forum Alb Trentino.

33 Over the years, they have provided financial support for the pilgrimage to Mecca in the form of a raffle and acted as a liaison with the Muslim Community of Albania (Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë – KMSH), which organises the annual Hajj.

34 Interview with Besim, 21 June 2024.

which they are involved, but rather to remain active within them. [As the UAMI] we meet certain needs. We, first-generation Albanians who created the UAMI, have needs. [...] We had the need to bring our imams, our teachers and theologians from Albania, who spoke the Albanian language, but we also had the need to maintain part of the Albanian tradition, of the Albanian language. The UAMI fulfils a cultural as well as a cultic purpose. In contrast, the Islamic communities in cities such as Piacenza or Bergamo are mostly or entirely cultic; that is, a mosque where you meet to pray together.³⁵

Some authors have argued that Balkan diaspora leaders in Europe have prioritised the national cause, distancing themselves from other ‘non-European’ Muslims, leaving little room for contact with their communities, except with the Turks (Bougarel, 2005: 19). On the other hand, Behloul (2016: 80) has spoken of a process of de-ethnification of Islam in Switzerland among Albanian-speaking populations from North Macedonia and Kosovo. However, as observed by Thijl Sunier (2023: 35–6), the desire to form mono-national groups does not necessarily involve practices of isolation or the undermining of other associative networks – that is, their dilution into a de-ethnicised kind of Muslim identity. The challenge confronting individuals within the UAMI is not merely the establishment of a religious organisation in response to the predicaments engendered by their status as a religious minority within a foreign nation (Baumann, 2002: 99). Rather, they have been undergoing a reflexive process of reconsideration and reconstruction of their Muslim identity as Albanians coming from a post-Communist context. They are continuously confronted with their complex past and their current present in Italy, while addressing the specific religious and cultural needs of their community.

Conclusions

This article has contributed to filling a significant gap in the research on Muslims in Italy, with a particular focus on Albanian Muslims. While the trend toward individualised religious practices is a common pattern in many post-Communist countries due particularly to the impact of the Communist dictatorship (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a, 2015b), Albanian Muslims in Italy have managed to define their identity through a collective and organisational effort.

35 Interview with Dritan, 3 July 2024.

In the context of migration to a European country, people within the UAMI have redefined their identity through multilayered processes of in-group distinction vis-à-vis other Albanians who do not self-define as Muslims, other ethnic Albanian Muslims coming from a different national history, and other non-Albanian Muslims.

An exploration of our interlocutors' narratives has shown that this dynamic was nurtured by a felt need to recover a past dimension of their history, reconnecting with their religious past. Our interlocutors' identity and sense of belonging are thus deeply intertwined with their historical background and the cultural and religious challenges they face in the contemporary context. By examining how the Islamic field has been reconstructed in post-Communist Albania after years of erasing all forms of religious expression from the public arena, it is possible to comprehend the void that religious traditions and knowledge strive to fill today. The UAMI case demonstrates how religion, despite having been repressed, can be revived and flourish through the strength of community-centred cultic and cultural practices. Islamic associations play a crucial role in this process, offering a vital platform for community life and support (Riccio, 2006; Vicini, 2021). At the same time, the UAMI provides a religious locus but also a 'cultural' one, where religiosity can be experienced through a shared language and a common approach to the tradition. This common approach emerges from Albania's particular history: its Communist past, its multi-religious environment and its long history of connection and dialogue with Europe. The 'cultic' and 'cultural' dimensions mutually strengthen each other in the associative context, enabling the construction of a strong sense of belonging, solidarity, and religious practice. The UAMI's religious gatherings and events serve to preserve our interlocutors' attachment to the Islamic tradition while also creating opportunities for cultivating a sense of belonging that goes beyond religious observance, thus reinforcing the importance of community in sustaining a shared sense of faith and identity.

Our interlocutors established the UAMI to find a physical and moral place for sharing language, food, history, and the experience of being Albanians, Muslims, and migrants living in Italy. Contrary to the assumption that Muslims in Europe would tend to gather behind shared Islamic symbols and practices, the UAMI did not promote a de-culturalised or de-ethnicised kind of Islam. There is no evidence of any significant tendency towards orthopraxy or the pursuit of a so-called 'true and pure Islam'. Instead, our interlocutors emphasise the cultivation of a Muslim spirituality grounded in national linguistic and cultural traditions, while simultaneously softening the emphasis upon some basic cultic obligations when needed. While its members may not always be fervent practitioners, the UAMI enables them to better know and experience

Islam within a domestic, familiar environment. The global dimension of the *umma* is invoked only in the face of significant events or tragedies shared with the broader Muslim community, as exemplified by one of our interlocutors with regard to the current situation in the Palestinian territories. In such cases, the UAMI's leadership is frequently engaged with the Italian Islamic landscape, particularly through its collaboration with UCOII, while references to a global idea of Islam are normally only marginal and limited in number.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the resilience and adaptability of religious and ethnic identity factors for Albanian Muslims who have migrated to a post-9/11 Western context. Called to come to terms with their attachment to a Muslim past, they reinterpret their forms of attachment to the Islamic tradition by engaging with their complex national past, which often leads them to self-differentiate from other Muslim groups in the country. Despite coming from a background of religious loss, self-identified Albanian Muslims have managed to reconstruct and reaffirm their religious identity in an environment that, while presenting challenges, also offers opportunities for religious revival and the strengthening of their intranational connections. In this sense, by bringing the diverse religious experience of its members into the multifaceted panorama of Italian Islam, the UAMI is significantly contributing to the redefinition of this panorama through the contribution of new generations of Muslims.

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