

# The Crosses of Bushat

By Xhavit Shala

The tranquil Rumija<sup>1</sup> mountain is the highest peak of the Albanian inhabited region of Kraja, lying in the western shore of the Montenegrin part of the Shkodra Lake.<sup>2</sup> The people of Kraja often refer to themselves as people from Shkodra. Jokingly, it is said that when asked during a rally in 1995 of whether they wanted to stay under Yugoslavia or under Albania, they answered in one voice that they wanted to be under Shkodra.

But the silence of the Rumija mountain was disturbed by Serb army choppers who landed there on June 18, 2005. The helicopters were carrying a three ton and a half steel construction of a pre-fabricated church that was assembled on the top of the Rumija Mountain. The cross of the church was produced in Serbia while the three bells had been ordered in Russia. The bunker-like church was placed near the remnants of another church that dated back to the year 1001 and was part of the history of the Serbs, Albanians and Montenegrins. It is reported that at this church that was destroyed by the Ottomans in 1571, John (Gjon) Buzuku wrote his “Meshar” (book of prayer, the first book to have reached us in Albanian\*).

The Serb religious authorities, while setting their property claim over the site, acted unilaterally without consulting with the Montenegrin state authorities or the Albanian local government. Such an action caused a political row in Serb-Montenegrin relations and triggered a harsh reaction among Albanians. The Chairman of the Democratic League of the Albanians in Montenegro, Mehmet Bardhi, considered the construction of the church “the most serious provocation made against Albanians during the last 50 years”, alluding that the action “was only preparing the ground for some ulterior actions”<sup>3</sup>. The Serbs apparently found an effective way to test and provoke the Albanians. They set a dangerous precedent in our borders that may incite a conflict over disputable religious sites.

The climate of conflict in Rumija, descended then to Shkoder Rozafa castle. The dispute this time related a religious site disputably called the church of Saint Stephan or the mosque of Sultan Fatih.

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<sup>2</sup> The article was first published in the daily Korrieri of January 17, 2006

<sup>3</sup> «Beta», August 1, 2005 – the Chairman of the Democratic League of Albanians in Montenegro, Mehmet Bardhi, considered the erection of the church in Mount Rumija “the greatest provocation made against Albanians in the last 50 years”. “This is laying the ground for something else” Bardhi said to radio “Antena M” of Podgorica.

The Church of Saint Stephen, as the Catholics refer to it, or otherwise called the Mosque of Sultan Fatih by the Muslims, has a history that dates back to very early times. Placed on a strategic location within the walls of the Rozafa castle, the church later became a cathedral. After the ottoman invasion, the Rozafa castle and the church-turned-mosque became a symbol of ottoman power. The long period under the ottoman rule and its transformation into a mosque did not affect any major changes on the original design of the former Saint Stephen cathedral. For many decades it served as a place of worship for both religious communities, assuming the term of church-mosque.

The church-mosque and the Rozafa castle are now monuments of culture that are protected by the state. Due to its unique history and actual state of disrepair the site drew the attention of the American Embassy in Tirana that decided to fund its restoration. Ambassador Ries undertook the trip to Shkodra to give the good news to the citizens and the religious communities in Shkodra. But the Mufti of Shkodra opposed the restoration of the site. According to him the construction was to either be restored into a mosque or left as it is, in ruins. The Catholics were quick to reciprocate. According to them the site should be restored into a church because it was originally built as such and was transformed only due to the ottoman invasion. Unlike in the past, the Catholics hastened to hold a mass in the open air under the rain that was falling that day. A harsh reaction from the Mufti's office followed. What a pity! What the religious communities of Shkodra have proven unable to achieve, Mehmet Pashe Bushatliu, the Albanian ruler of the region under the Supreme Porte, achieved 250 years ago. By a special order he made the premises of the church-mosque available for prayer to both communities. Six days in the week it served as a mosque for Muslim while on Sunday morning it opened its doors for Shkodra's Catholic believers that held their traditional mass there.

Whereas the clash that took place in Rumija was between Serbs and Albanians, the quarrel in Shkodra concerned Albanians of different religions. The episode in Rozafa serves to demonstrate how delicately the state and the religious communities must approach the issue of religious coexistence in our country. The state must not sit idle. The state must make efforts to prevent possible conflicts of such nature in full respect of the Universal Declaration and the European Convention on Human Rights. The state must serve as a regulator and active promoter of religious freedoms and rights.

The concerns over the episode of the church-mosque did not end there but were followed by the incident of the crosses in Bushat. In December of last month three large iron crosses, symbols of the Catholic faith, were erected without permission in three hills overlooking the town of Bushat. According to the Mufti's office in Shkodra, citizens of this area of the Muslim faith have complained and asked that religious symbols be placed only within the premises of the religious sites. Several media reported that the crosses had been erected by foreign missionaries without the prior knowledge of the Archbishopric of Shkodra<sup>4</sup>. The speculations in the media lead to greater calls on the

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<sup>4</sup> «Korrieri» daily, January 9, 2006, quotes Mufti Bajraktari as saying that he had discussed the issue of the crosses of the Archbishop of Shkodra, Anxhelo Masafra, since November 16 of this year. "We do not know anything. WE have not ordered any erection of crosses and they may have been placed by foreign missionaries that may have come from England or France," Archbishop Masafra responded.

local government to intervene. The local government of Bushat though remained passive while local heads of religious communities unlike the believers which were mature and free of passions entered into an irresponsible war of statements. At the height of media exchange of statements, that was such as to hold the actors legally responsible for inciting hatred among religions, on January 10 some one did not hesitate to cut down one of the erected crosses. On two occasions, the press, referring to sources from the Albanian Secret Service, reported on the possibility that “secret service cells belonging to countries on our northern borders were attempting to create sources of tension to shift the attention away from upcoming important developments in the region”.<sup>5</sup>

In several instances, reliable sources from our law enforcement agencies have reported cases of Serb secret service having incited radical actions in our religious communities. These services have incited the radicalization of religious stances and propagated about the danger of radical Islam among the Albanians for years now. By attempting to imply that Kosova’s independence undermines Europe’s stability, their goal is to compromise its efforts for independence. They are working intensively to present the international community with “evidence” regarding the alleged strengthening of the Islamic factor in Albania, following the rotation of power here. The goal is to weaken the role Albania could play in the process of determining the status of Kosovo. Apparently, the Serbs seem to have a strategy in place that includes the use of all of their instruments, from the secret services to the media.

Such Serb actions aim to shift attention away from their former dealings with Al Qaeda. According to press reports (Zagreb’s daily "Globus" as quoted by Belgrade’s “Blic” of October 30, 2004) “During the mid 80s Osama bin Laden, has stayed in the then Yugoslavia. He has resided in Zagreb and Beograd, and completed transaction of purchasing weapons. The document of June 25, 1986 of Yugoslavia’s Federal Department for the Movement of Goods (SDPR), in Belgrade, was and signed by Colonel Borislav Jurishiç says that Bin Laden, a citizen of Saudi Arabia, with a passport number 2110/37, has visited the department in question on June 25, 1986, at 10:30 hrs”.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Belgrade’s “friendship” with Bin Laden has been maintained to our days. According to information posted in the Israeli Web Site, “Debka”, the explosive materials used in the terrorist attacks of last summer in London came from Belgrade. The site editor, who is said to be closely linked with the Israeli Secret Service Mosad, Giora Shamis, says: “Belgrade is a big market for the sale and purchase of weapons and Al Qaeda is a regular buyer there”.<sup>7</sup>

Since March of last year, as it analyzed the incidents of the unlicensed constructions of crosses in Elbasan and Xarë of Saranda, the Albanian Center for National Security

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<sup>5</sup> «It is suspected that the persons who committed the acts against the crosses may be individuals with links to Serb Intelligence Services,” a high Shkodra Police official who did not want to be name has told Gazeta. “The perpetrators of this criminal act may have used the recent incident between the Muslim and Catholic leaders in Shkodra over the Castle Church as a pretext,” the source says”, “Gazeta Shqiptare”, January 11, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> The daily Globus of Zagreb, as quoted by Belgrade’s Blic of October 30, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> «Koha Ditore», July 12, 2005.

Studies warned of the dangers coming from these incidents and potential for religious confrontations.<sup>8</sup> Aside from the potential threat to our internal security, there were consequences that appeared on the international scene as well. The presidency of the Conference of European Churches released through the Greek Embassy in Tirana a statement that expressed its alleged concerns about certain incidents of a religious character in southern Albania. Furthermore, a day after the incidents in Bushat, the official paper of the Holy See, "L'Osservatore Romano," protested against the incident, saying that it considered it a tendentious "episode of intolerance" against Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

The confrontation over the religious symbols aims to present the Christian religions in Albania as under threat. These developments are putting into question the religious tolerance in Albania, a value that is recognized by the west. The events over these symbols harm the country's international image. The bill for the cross in Bushat, though erected without permission and on public land, will be paid by all the Albanians.

It is important that our religious authorities act without delay to establish the practice that religious symbols can be built only within religious facilities. In cooperation with state structures, these communities may also propose the legal arrangements regarding procedures on putting up a religious symbol. The protagonistic tendencies of local figures has negative consequences and should be a matter that needs to be looked at with concern by the central religious authorities.<sup>10</sup> It is also very important that the law enforcement structures, the local government, and religious authorities remain active and work together to prevent such incidents from happening again.

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<sup>8</sup> The article aimed to draw attention to the dangers coming from the clashes over religious symbols and the importance of religious issues for our national security.

<sup>9</sup> "L'Osservatore Romano", the Vatican's newspaper, on January 11, 2006, protested against the destruction of the crosses in the area of Bushat but still unidentified persons. According to the paper the cutting down of the cross took place on Muslim holiday of Eid and that « this episode of intolerance was addressed against the Christian believers. The paper then quotes from the remarks made by the late Pope John Paul II during a visit to Austria in 1998: « We can never allow that the cross, the symbol of salvation, be snatched from us by others". "L'Osservatore Romano" further elaborated that the incident took place on the day that the Albanian President Alfred Moisiu was in Shkoder attending on the occasion of the Eid.

<sup>10</sup> The Albanian Muslim Community with its decision no. 708, of November 16, 2006, dismissed the Mufti of Shkodra, Bashkim Bajraktari, with the argument that: "Bajraktari has often addressed the media without taking at all into consideration the Chairmanship of the Muslim Community and has even openly lied to the Chairman of the Muslim Community and has caused problems in the interreligious relations with statements that it has made".